

# General Scholium

## The General Scholium to Isaac Newton's *Principia mathematica*

*Published for the first time as an appendix to the 2nd (1713) edition of the Principia, the General Scholium reappeared in the 3rd (1726) edition with some amendments and additions. As well as countering the natural philosophy of Leibniz and the Cartesians, the General Scholium contains an excursion into natural theology and theology proper. In this short text, Newton articulates the design argument (which he fervently believed was furthered by the contents of his Principia), but also includes an oblique argument for a unitarian conception of God and an implicit attack on the doctrine of the Trinity, which Newton saw as a post-biblical corruption. The English translation here is that of Andrew Motte (1729). Italics and orthography as in original.*[1] For more on the [General Scholium](#) visit the Newton Project Canada website.

### General Scholium:

The hypotheses of Vortices is press'd with many difficulties. That every Planet by a radius drawn to the Sun may describe areas proportional to the times of description, the periodic times of the several parts of the Vortices should observe the duplicate proportion of their distances from the Sun. But that the periodic times of the Planets may obtain the sesquuplicate proportion of their distances from the Sun, the periodic times of the parts of the Vortex ought to be in sesquuplicate proportion of their distances. That the smaller Vortices may maintain their lesser revolutions about *Saturn, Jupiter*, and other Planets, and swim quietly and undisturb'd in the greater Vortex of the Sun, the periodic times of the parts of the Sun's Vortex should be equal. But the rotation of the Sun and Planets about their axes, which ought to correspond with the motions of their Vortices, recede far from all these proportions. The motions of the Comets are exceedingly regular, are govern'd by the same laws with the motions of the Planets, and can by no means be accounted for by the hypotheses of Vortices. For Comets are carry'd with very eccentric motions through all parts of the heavens indifferently, with a freedom that is incompatible with the notion of a Vortex.

Bodies, projected in our air, suffer no resistance but from the air. Withdraw the air, as is done in Mr. *Boyle's* vacuum, and the resistance ceases. For in this void a bit of fine down and a piece of solid gold descend with equal velocity. And the parity of reason must take

place in the celestial spaces above the Earth's atmosphere; in which spaces, where there is no air to resist their motions, all bodies will move with the greatest freedom; and the Planets and Comets will constantly pursue their revolutions in orbits given in kind and position, according to the laws above explain'd. But though these bodies may indeed persevere in their orbits by the mere laws of gravity, yet they could by no means have at first deriv'd the regular position of the orbits themselves from those laws.

The six primary Planets are revolv'd about the Sun, in circles concentric with the Sun, and with motions directed towards the same parts and almost in the same plan. Ten Moons are revolv'd about the Earth, Jupiter and Saturn, in circles concentric with them, with the same direction of motion, and nearly in the planes of the orbits of those Planets. But it is not to be conceived that mere mechanical causes could give birth to so many regular motions: since the Comets range over all parts of the heavens, in very eccentric orbits. For by that kind of motion they pass easily through the orbits of the Planets, and with great rapidity; and in their aphelions, where they move the slowest, and are detain'd the longest, they recede to the greatest distances from each other, and thence suffer the least disturbance from their mutual attractions. This most beautiful System of the Sun, Planets, and Comets, could only proceed from the counsel and dominion of an intelligent and powerful being. And if the fixed Stars are the centers of other like systems, these, being form'd by the like wise counsel, must be all subject to the dominion of One; especially since the light of the fixed Stars is of the same nature with the light of the Sun, and from every system light passes into all the other systems. And lest the systems of the fixed Stars should, by their gravity, fall on each other mutually, he hath placed those Systems at immense distances from one another.

This Being governs all things, not as the soul of the world, but as Lord over all: And on account of his dominion he is wont to be called *Lord God Pantokrator*[2], or *Universal Ruler*. For *God* is a relative word, and has a respect to servants; and Deity is the dominion of God, not over his own body, as those imagine who fancy God to be the soul of the world, but over servants. The supreme God is a Being eternal, infinite, absolutely perfect; but a being, however perfect, without dominion, cannot be said to be Lord God; for we say, my God, your God, the God of *Israel*, the God of Gods, and Lord of Lords; but we do not say, my Eternal, your Eternal, the Eternal of *Israel*, the Eternal of Gods; we do not say, my Infinite, or my Perfect: These are titles which have no respect to servants. The word *God* usually a [3] signifies *Lord*; but every lord is not a God. It is the dominion of a spiritual being which constitutes a God; a true, supreme, or imaginary dominion makes a true, supreme, or

imaginary God. And from his true dominion it follows that the true God is a Living, Intelligent, and Powerful Being; and, from his other perfections, that he is Supreme or most Perfect. He is Eternal and Infinite, Omnipotent and Omniscient; that is, his duration reaches from Eternity to Eternity; his presence from Infinity to Infinity; he governs all things, and knows all things that are or can be done. He is not Eternity and Infinity, but Eternal and Infinite; he is not Duration and Space, but he endures and is present. He endures forever, and is every where present; and, by existing always and every where, he constitutes Duration and Space. Since every particle of Space is *always*, and every indivisible moment of Duration is *every where*, certainly the Maker and Lord of all things cannot be *never* and *no where*. Every soul that has perception is, though in different times and in different organs of sense and motion, still the same indivisible person. There are given successive parts in duration, co-existent parts in space, but neither the one nor the other in the person of a man, or his thinking principle; and much less can they be found in the thinking substance of God. Every man, so far as he is a thing that has perception, is one and the same man during his whole life, in all and each of his organs of sense. God is the same God, always and everywhere. He is omnipresent, not *virtually* only, but also *substantially*; for virtue cannot subsist without substance. In him b [3] are all things contained and moved; yet neither affects the other: God suffers nothing from the motion of bodies; bodies find no resistance from the omnipresence of God. 'Tis allowed by all that the supreme God exists necessarily; and by the same necessity he exists *always* and *every where*. Whence also he is all similar, all eye, all ear, all brain, all arm, all power to perceive, to understand, and to act; but in a manner not at all human, in a manner not at all corporeal, in a manner utterly unknown to us. As a blind man has no idea of colours, so have we no idea of the manner by which the all-wise God perceives and understands all things. He is utterly void of all body and bodily figure, and can therefore neither be seen, nor heard, not touched; nor ought he to be worshipped under the representation of any corporeal thing. We have ideas of his attributes, but what the real substance of anything is we know not. In bodies, we see only their figures and colours, we hear only the sounds, we touch only their outward surfaces, we smell only the smells, and taste the savours; but their inward substances are not to be known, either by our senses, or by any reflex act of our minds; much less then have we any idea of the substance of God. We know him only by his most wise and excellent contrivances of things, and final causes; we admire him for his perfections; but we reverence and adore him on account of his dominion. For we adore him as his servants; and a God without dominion, providence, and final causes, is nothing else but Fate and Nature. Blind metaphysical necessity, which is certainly the same always and every where, could produce no variety of

things. All that diversity of natural things which we find, suited to different times and places, could arise from nothing but the ideas and will of a Being necessarily existing. But, by way of allegory, God is said to see, to speak, to laugh, to love, to hate, to desire, to give, to receive, to rejoice, to be angry, to fight, to frame, to work, to build. For all our notions of God are taken from the ways of mankind, by a certain similitude which, though not perfect, has some likeness, however. And thus much concerning God; to discourse of whom from the appearances of things, does certainly belong to Natural Philosophy. [5]

Hitherto we have explain'd the phaenomena of the heavens and of our sea, by the power of Gravity, but have not yet assign'd the cause of this power. This is certain, that it must proceed from a cause that penetrates to the very centers of the Sun and Planets, without suffering the least diminution of its force; that operates, not according to the quantity of surfaces of the particles upon which it acts, (as mechanical causes use to do,) but according to the quantity of the solid matter which they contain, and propagates its virtue on all sides, to immense distances, decreasing always in the duplicate proportion of the distances. Gravitation towards the Sun, is made up out of the gravitations towards the several particles of which the body of the Sun is compos'd; and in receding from the Sun, decreases accurately in the duplicate proportion of the distances, as far as the orb of Saturn, as evidently appears from the quiescence of the aphelions of the Planets; nay, and even to the remotest aphelions of the Comets, if those aphelions are also quiescent. But hitherto I have not been able to discover the cause of those properties of gravity from phaenomena, and I frame no hypotheses. For whatever is not deduc'd from the phaenomena, is to be called an hypothesis; and hypotheses, whether metaphysical or physical, whether of occult qualities or mechanical, have no place in experimental philosophy. In this philosophy particular propositions are inferr'd from the phaenomena, and afterwards render'd general by induction. Thus it was that the impenetrability, the mobility, and the impulsive force of bodies, and the laws of motion and of gravitation, were discovered. And to us it is enough, that gravity does really exist, and act according to the laws which we have explained, and abundantly serves to account for all the motions of the celestial bodies, and of our sea.

And now we might add something concerning a certain most subtle Spirit, which pervades and lies hid in all gross bodies; by the force and action of which Spirit, the particles of bodies mutually attract one another at near distances, and cohere, if contiguous; and electric bodies operate to greater distances, as well repelling as attracting the neighbouring

corpuscles; and light is emitted, reflected, refracted, inflected, and heats bodies; and all sensation is excited, and the members of animal bodies move at the command of the will, namely, by the vibrations of this Spirit, mutually propagated along the solid filaments of the nerves, from the outward organs of sense to the brain, and from the brain into the muscles. But these are things that cannot be explain'd in few words, nor are we furnish'd with that sufficiency of experiments which is required to an accurate determination and demonstration of the laws by which this electric and elastic spirit operates.

**Notes**[1] Isaac Newton, *The Mathematical principles of natural philosophy*, trans. Andrew Motte (London, 1729), pp. 387-93.

[2] *Pantokrator*: original in Greek.

[3] Newton's note a: Dr. *Pocock* derives the Latin word *Deus* from the *Arabic du* (in the oblique case *di*,) which signifies *Lord*. And in this sense Princes are called *Gods*, *Psal.* lxxxii. ver. 6; and *John* x. ver. 35. And *Moses* is called a *God* to his brother *Aaron*, and a *God* to *Pharaoh* (*Exod.* iv. ver. 16; and vii. ver. 1 [correction for the 1729 edition, which reads: 8]). And in the same sense the souls of dead princes were formerly, by the Heathens, called *gods*, but falsely, because of their want of dominion. [This note was added to the 3rd, 1726 edition].

[4] Newton's note b: This was the opinion of the Ancients. So *Pythagoras* in *Cicer. de Nat. Deor.* lib. i. *Thales*, *Anaxagoras*, *Virgil*, *Georg.* lib. iv. ver. 220. and *Aeneid.* lib. vi. ver. 721. *Philo Allegor.* at the beginning of lib. i. *Aratus* in his *Phaenom.* at the beginning. So also the sacred Writers, as *St. Paul*, *Acts* xvii. ver. 27, 28. *St. John's Gosp.* chap. xiv. ver. 2. *Moses* in *Deut.* iv. ver. 39; and x. ver. 14. *David*, *Psal.* cxxxix. ver. 7, 8, 9. *Solomon*, 1 *Kings* viii. ver. 27. *Job* xxii. ver. 12, 13, 14. *Jeremiah* xxiii. ver. 23, 24. The Idolaters supposed the Sun, Moon, and Stars, the Souls of Men, and other parts of the world, to be parts of the supreme God, and therefore to be worshiped; but erroneously.

[5] 1713 edition: Experimental Philosophy.