



**Comparative Review of Some Dynamical Theories
of Gravitation: Being a Dissertation presented to
the Philosophical Faculty of the University of
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S. Tolver Preston

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An excerpt from the:

Introduction.

THE modes of accounting for natural phenomena have been very different at different times. The old philosophers had in general scarcely an idea of that which we now call a mechanical explanation; they figured to themselves rather the agencies working in nature as living beings. This applies also to Kepler, who banished from himself any idea of a mechanical explanation of the laws discovered by him. On the basis of the researches of Galileo, Newton was the founder of the Mechanics of to-day; and on his principles the edifice of the action-at-a-distance theory has been founded. Until Newton's time the notion of a direct action at a distance was completely unknown: on the contrary, many experiments exist by the Greek philosophers to account for the seeming action at a distance by the intervention of a medium; therefore Demokritos sought to explain natural phenomena by the motions of very fine bodies. First Boscovich, Mosotti, Wilhelm Weber, and many others developed the aspect of nature on the basis laid down by Newton, in accordance with which the universe consists of a number (if even very great) of material points, which, without anything intervening, act on each other directly at a distance, according to a mathematically exact formulated law. If the initial positions and velocities of all the atoms are given, then their motions can be calculated for any periods of time from the equations formulated by Newton, and so a clearly defined mathematical problem is presented.

It is, however, well to observe that Newton did not believe in such an action at a distance without the intervention of something, as appears from his third letter to Bentley, where he says: —

"That gravity should be innate, inherent, and essential to matter, so that one body may act upon another at a distance through a vacuum, without the mediation of anything else, by and through which their action and force may be conveyed from one to another, is to me so great an absurdity, that I believe no man who has in philosophical matters a competent faculty of thinking, can ever fall into it" (Newton's third letter to Bentley, February 25, 1692-3).

In the same sense speak many subsequent important scientists. For instance Count Rumford remarks: —

"Nobody surely in his sober senses has ever pretended to understand the mechanism of gravitation, and yet what sublime discoveries has our immortal Newton been enabled to make, merely by the investigation of the laws of its action" ("An Inquiry concerning the Source of the Heat which is excited by Friction" by Count Rumford, Phil. Trans. 1798).

These last scientists are therefore not satisfied with the Boscovich-Mosotti explanation of natural phenomena; they demand rather an explanation (by the intervention of a medium) of the seeming action at a distance. To give such an explanation was never seriously attempted by Newton: the first attempt of that kind is to be found in the mechanical gravitation theory of Le Sage, born at Geneva in 1724. This theory is contained in a memoir published in the Transactions of the Royal Berlin Academy for 1782, under the title *Lucrèce Newtonien*. There is also a book, *Deux Traités de Physique Mécanique*, edited by Pierre Prevost, Paris, 1818, which contains a full description of Le Sage's theory.

Le Sage lays emphasis on the probability of the existence of a mechanism of gravitation, and devoted his life to the development of his idea. The introductory paragraph of his memoir (entitled *Lucrèce Newtonien*) is as follows, translated from the French original, viz.: —

"I propose to show that if the first Epicureans had had as healthy ideas of Cosmography as several of their contemporaries (to whom they would not listen), and only a part of the knowledge of Geometry which was then prevalent, they would in all probability have discovered the laws of universal gravitation and its mechanical cause. Laws, the discovery and the demonstration of which...

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