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Newton' s Challenge to Philosophy: a programmatic essay

Schliesser, Eric (2010) *Newton' s Challenge to Philosophy: a programmatic essay*. In: UNSPECIFIED.



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Abstract

The main point of this paper is to identify a set of interlocking views that became (and still are!) very influential within philosophy in the wake of Newton' s success. These views use the authority of natural philosophy/mechanics to settle debates within philosophy. I label these " Newton' s Challenge." Newton had some hand in promoting them, but he is not responsible for all of them. My paper, thus, revisits an old theme articulated by A.E. Burt, but I offer new arguments and evidence. The heart of the paper (sections II-III) identifies the core set of related views that constitute " Newton' s Challenge." In section IIA I draw on two eighteenth century figures (Euler and Musschenbroek) to introduce arguments that give evidence for the existence of " Newton' s Challenge" and distinguish four strands within it. In section IIB I use Berkeley as evidence that something like " Newton' s Challenge" was recognized by philosophical opponents to Newton and I identify in Berkeley' s work five counter-strategies. In section IIC, I identify Newton' s contribution to Newton' s Challenge. In section III, I use the writings by MacLaurin, ' s Gravesande, and Musschenbroek to identify eight arguments that constitute the way " Newton' s Challenge" was articulated and developed in practice by eighteenth century Newtonians.

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Item Type: Conference or Workshop Item (UNSPECIFIED)

Keywords: Newton; science vs metaphysics; the origins of scientific philosophy; authority within philosophy

Subjects: [General Issues > History of Philosophy of Science](#)

Depositing User: [Eric Schliesser](#)

Date Deposited: 02 Feb 2010

Last Modified: 07 Oct 2010 11:19

Item ID: 5143

URI: <http://philsci-archive.pitt.edu/eprint/5143>

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