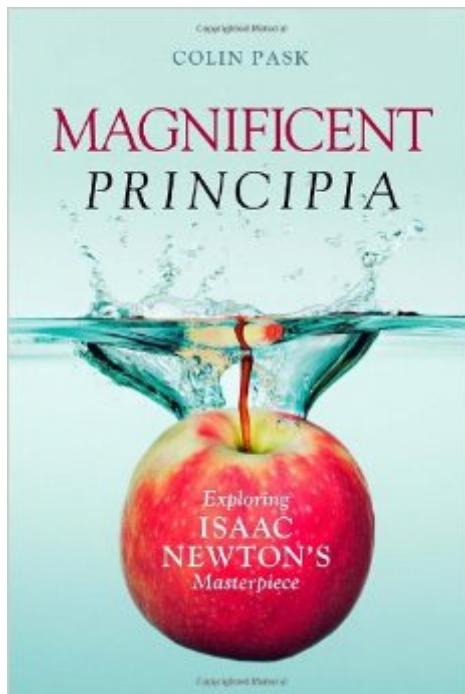


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Magnificent Principia: Exploring Isaac Newton's Masterpiece



Synopsis

Nobel laureate Steven Weinberg has written that "all that has happened since 1687 is a gloss on the Principia." Now you too can appreciate the significance of this stellar work, regarded by many as the greatest scientific contribution of all time. Despite its dazzling reputation, Isaac Newton's *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica*, or simply the Principia, remains a mystery for many people. Few of even the most intellectually curious readers, including professional scientists and mathematicians, have actually looked in the Principia or appreciate its contents. Mathematician Pask seeks to remedy this deficit in this accessible guided tour through Newton's masterpiece. Using the final edition of the Principia, Pask clearly demonstrates how it sets out Newton's (and now our) approach to science; how the framework of classical mechanics is established; how terrestrial phenomena like the tides and projectile motion are explained; and how we can understand the dynamics of the solar system and the paths of comets. He also includes scene-setting chapters about Newton himself and scientific developments in his time, as well as chapters about the reception and influence of the Principia up to the present day.

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Customer Reviews

Colin Pask has produced a highly readable book of philosophy and science. In this book he methodically explains, rule for rule, book by book, Newton's Principia. Pask's book indeed has something for everyone: For the history-oriented, it is a history of the development to modern science. Modern science began with Newton, but, as Newton readily acknowledged, he "stood on the shoulders of giants," meaning that he refined and organized what preceded him into a rational

system. Pask begins with a short description of the history of Western science and describes Newton's influences and the philosopher-scientists who preceded him and explains the significance they played as reflected in the Principia. Pask provides an excellent, brief, biography of Isaac Newton, and the Royal Society and the members who coaxed Newton into publishing his book. For the philosophically-oriented Pask briefly touches on Newton's alchemical leanings. Newton's system was a fully integrated one, incorporating philosophical and religious aspects of the universe with the scientific. While Newton wrote prodigiously on scientific matters, his literary output on alchemical subjects far outnumber the scientific. Pask could have spent more time explaining this aspect of Newton's work more fully. For the religiously-oriented, Pask contains Newton's thoughts about God. In this regard, Pask wisely chose to explain the third and last edition of the Principia. Previous editions were reluctant to assign a cause of the gravitational pull of earth or impetus of motion. In his last edition Newton plainly stated that God was this cause, the first cause, of gravity and motion. God was ultimately unknowable, but through God's attributes God could be experienced, if not in a superficial manner.

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