Book Review

Having watched the movie of Sir Isaac Newton’s life in class and after reading *Isaac Newton* by James Gleick, I feel I have developed a greater appreciation for the physical principles that Isaac Newton spent most of his life working to discover. While these principles are of tremendous importance because his discoveries set the foundation upon which modern science and mathematics are based, it was incredible to find out that Newton made these discoveries primarily by himself, aside from the occasional help of other philosophers, especially when considering the difficulty of the work he was doing.

Newton’s proof that we were provided from the *Principia* is a perfect example of this. In his work, Newton digresses through the proof by identifying segments of the ellipse and making comparisons between them as a means of logically progressing towards his idea of the inverse square to support his proposed concept of gravity. The depth of his geometric analysis in the proof, in my opinion, shows his genius; after reading through his explanation, I’m confident in saying that I still find myself lost when trying to comprehend his level of understanding, and I have knowledge--at least basic knowledge--of both modern calculus and physics. In Gleick’s book, he states that “Of the *Principia* itself, fewer than a thousand copies had been printed” due to the fact that most people were confused by his book because they couldn’t understand his
methods and logic, which I can now understand from seeing the complexity of its proofs (Gleick 134).

Despite his genius in academia and philosophy, Newton had a very difficult personality and often was unable to successfully cooperate with others. He spent most of his life alone as he tirelessly worked to identify the laws of nature, and he also never had a wife or children. While the latter may be because of his religious and philosophical beliefs, it could also be a sign of an antisocial disorder. In addition, Gleick also reveals in his book that later on in Newton’s life, Newton imposed his will on other philosophers and astronomers of the time, such as John Flamsteed, for his personal gain. In fact, he “wrested from Flamsteed the astronomer’s own life’s work” for his own personal use while disregarding its impact on Flamsteed (Gleick 155-156). Based on this behavior, I think one could also describe his behavior as psychopathic due to his due to a lack of remorse or empathy for his destructive actions.

Newton was obviously one of the most influential philosophers of modern society. His discoveries were groundbreaking and have been critical for other areas of science, mathematics, and engineering, yet only a handful of philosophers could even understand his work at the time. He is truly a person who comes around once in a few hundred years if not a millennium. I am glad to have read the book as it exposed to how brilliant Newton really was.
Works Cited