

Western Perspectives on Positive Psychology

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in collaboration with the authors*

Hope has been a powerful underlying force in Western civilization. Indeed, looking back through the recorded history of Western civilization, **hope**—the agentic, goal-focused thinking that gets you from *here* to *there*—has been so interwoven into the fabric of our civilization's eras and events that it can be hard to detect, like yeast in bread. In this regard, the belief in a positive future is reflected in many of our everyday ideas and words. For example, words such as *plan* and *trust* carry assumptions about the length of the timeline that stretches ahead of us and the probabilities that our actions will have positive effects on these future events.

This chapter looks backward to foundational ideas and exemplary events that have shaped modern hope and the 21st century. We are purposefully linear in our historical accounting, starting with the Greek myth of Pandora's box and ending with a modern tale of triumph. But first, we explore how and why a robust force such as hope has been absent from parts of the tale of Western civilization.

Hope: Ubiquitous Yet Hidden

Although hope has remarkable and pervasive power, we are often unaware of its presence. Perhaps this is because hope is embedded in many related

ideas. On this point, hope often is not identified by name in sources that are essentially all about it (e.g., for a thorough review of how hope is seldom discussed in philosophy, see Ernst Bloch's book *The Principle of Hope* [1959; trans. 1986]). In fact, if we examine the tables of contents or indexes of prominent Western writings, the word *hope* cannot be found. For example, the book *Key Ideas in Human Thought* (McLeish, 1993), contains not one index listing for hope. Imagine the irony of omitting the term *hope* from a supposedly complete archiving of human ideas! According to Bloch, hope has been "as unexplored as the Antarctic" (quoted in Schumacher, 2003, p. 2).

Hope as Part of Greek Mythology

In all of human history, there has been a need to believe that bad could be transformed into good, that ugly could become beautiful, and that problems could be solved. But civilizations have differed in the degree to which they have viewed such changes as possible. For example, consider the classic Greek myth of Pandora's box, a story about the origin of hope. There are two versions of this tale.

In one version, Zeus created Pandora, the first woman, in order to exact revenge against Prometheus (and against humans in general) because he had stolen fire from the gods. Pandora was endowed with amazing beauty and grace but also with the tendency to lie and deceive. Zeus sent Pandora with her dowry chest to Epimetheus, who married her. In using what may be one of the earliest examples of reverse psychology, Zeus instructed Pandora not to open her dowry chest upon arriving on Earth. Of course, she ignored Zeus's order and opened the chest. Out spewed all manner of troubles into the world, except hope, which remained in the chest—not to help humankind but to taunt it with the message that hope does not really exist. In this version, therefore, hope was but a cruel hoax.

A second version of this tale holds that all earthly misfortunes were caused by Pandora's curiosity rather than by any inherent evil nature. The gods tested her with instructions not to open the dowry chest. She was sent to Epimetheus, who accepted her despite the warning of his brother, Prometheus, about gifts from Zeus. When Pandora opened the dowry chest, hope was not a hoax but a blessing and a source of comfort for misfortunes (Hamilton, 1969). And in this positive version of the story, hope was to serve as an antidote to the evils (e.g., gout, rheumatism, and colic for the body, and envy, spite, and revenge for the mind) that escaped when the chest was opened. Whether hope was a hoax or an antidote, these two versions of this story reveal the tremendous ambivalence of the Greeks toward hope.



Pandora's Box

Source: © Corbis.

Religious Hope in Western Civilization

The history of Western civilization parallels the histories of Judaism and Christianity. This is why the phrase *Judeo-Christian heritage* often is linked to Western civilization. It is no accident that the timeline of Western civilization (see Figures 2.1 through 2.4) overlays the Judeo-Christian heritage, including the period before Christ (BC) and the period after the birth of Christ (AD). These timelines highlight significant happenings in the history of religion: the opening of Notre Dame Cathedral, the building of the west façade of Chartres Cathedral, and the publishing of St. Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*. In this respect, the presence of hope in the early periods of Western civilization is illustrated clearly in such biblical passages as "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done" (Matthew 6:10) and "... there was the hope that creation itself would one day be set free from its slavery to decay and would share the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Romans 8:18, 20, 21). These passages reflect a vision of hope for God's reign on Earth as well as the hope for God's will to be done on Earth as it is in heaven. Or consider Corinthians I, 15:19, in which St. Paul writes about faith in Christ for this life on Earth and beyond: "If our one hope in Christ is for this life only, we are all men most to be pitied." In addition, Christianity's doctrines hold that God's kingdom on Earth is not only awaited—it is anticipated. Thus, it is logical that the belief in hope would influence secular intellectual assumptions and ideas.

As shown by these examples of hope in religion, impressive human endeavors can result from a hopeful disposition. In each case, an active verb is connected to a noun that refers to an outcome—an achievement. Note the words *opening*, *building*, and *publishing*. It should be noted as well that these verbs were followed by nouns denoting significant achievements in our civilization, such as the cathedrals at Chartres and Notre Dame.

These examples also are important because they are achievements along a road out of a period that is sometimes referred to as the Dark Ages. It is hard for us to appreciate the willpower and efforts of our ancestors, who strove to achieve significant milestones in a period known for the absence of such. Indeed, although these times were not truly dark, the Middle Ages (500–1450), before the Renaissance, certainly were enveloped in the shadows of oppression and ignorance; inertia and intellectual lassitude were the norms. As Davies (1996) writes,

There is an air of immobility about many descriptions of the medieval world. The impression is created by emphasizing the slow pace of technological change, the closed character of feudal society, and the fixed, theocratic perceptions of human life. The prime symbols of the period are the armoured knight on his lumbering steed; the serfs tied to the land

of their lord's demesne [domain or property]; and cloistered monks and nuns at prayer. They are made to represent physical immobility, social immobility, intellectual immobility. (p. 291)

This intellectual and social immobility reflected a paralysis of curiosity and initiative. From the years of the Middle Ages (500–1500), such paralysis precluded the purposeful, sustained planning and action required by a hopeful, advancing society. The fires of advancement were reduced to embers during this dark millennium and kept glowing only by a few institutions such as the monasteries and their schools.

Eventually, as the Dark Ages were ended by of the brightness of the Renaissance and its economic growth and prosperity, hope was seen as more relevant to present life on Earth than to the afterlife (i.e., a better life on Earth became possible, even probable). Therefore, the religious hope that focused on a distant future, after life on Earth, became somewhat less important as the Renaissance emerged. Indeed, the focus during the Renaissance was on the contemporary anticipation of better days in the here and now. Related to this new focus, the philosopher Immanuel Kant decided that the religious nature of hope precluded its inclusion in discussions of how to bring about changes on Earth. With this shift, the religious conception of hope faded as the primary motivation for action. Strengthening and hastening this change was another aspect of religious hope, identified by what Farley (2003) called "wishful passivity," a perspective that still influences religious hope today. Farley notes, "Religious hope . . . gives a false sense that all is really well and 'all shall be well.' Belief in an ultimate future, in this view, short-circuits commitment to a proximate future" (p. 25). In other words, the religious hope that is oriented to the afterlife can become an unconscious barrier to taking action in this life. The problem with this kind of religious hope as described by Farley is that it may give a sense of delayed comfort about future conditions. Unfortunately, in focusing on a desired future state instead of upon what must happen to reach that state, the person's attentions and efforts are drawn away from what is needed in the here and now.

Farley's (2003) comment is similar to an important point made by Eric Fromm in his book, *The Revolution of Hope: Toward a Humanized Technology* (1974). Fromm states that some definitions of hope often are "misunderstood and confused with attitudes that have nothing to do with Hope and in fact are the very opposite" (p. 6). Fromm goes on to point out that hope is not the same as desires and wishes (i.e., products of envisioning a possibility for change without having a plan or requisite energy for producing such change). Unlike hope, these latter motives have passive qualities in which there is little or no effort made to realize the desired objective. An extreme level of this passivity yields what Fromm called *nihilism* (p. 8).

Revision of the History of Hope in Western Civilization

THE PRE-RENAISSANCE PERIOD

The positive beliefs and hope of Western civilization solidified after the Renaissance. It should be noted, however, that hope was not totally absent from earlier epochs. Consider, for example, the following brief listing of illustrative hope-related human activities that took place before the Renaissance:

The building of the museum and library at Alexandria (established 307 BC)

The opening of the first English school at Canterbury (598 AD)

Publication of the Exeter Book collection of English poetry (970 AD)

The development of systematic musical notation (990 AD)

Revival of the artistic traditions in Italy (1000)

The attempt to fly or float in the air (1000)

Groundbreaking for York Cathedral in England (1070)

The founding of Bologna University in Italy (1119)

The building of St. Bartholomew's Hospital in London (1123)

Completion of the western façade of Chartres Cathedral in France (1150)

The popularizing of chess in England (1151)

The founding of Oxford University (1167) and Cambridge University (1200) in England

The opening of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris (1235)

The printing of Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica* (1273)

Development of the Italian city of Florence into the leading commercial and cultural city of Europe (1282)

Consider these events on the timeline in Figure 2.1. They reflect people having the spirit and making the effort needed to reach goals. These historical markers required goal-directed actions instead of mere waiting for better times or good things to happen. With the advent of the Renaissance, these active and hopeful thoughts began to be coupled with goal-directed actions. We turn to the Renaissance and the crucial events in the next section.



St. Thomas Aquinas

Source: © Corbis.

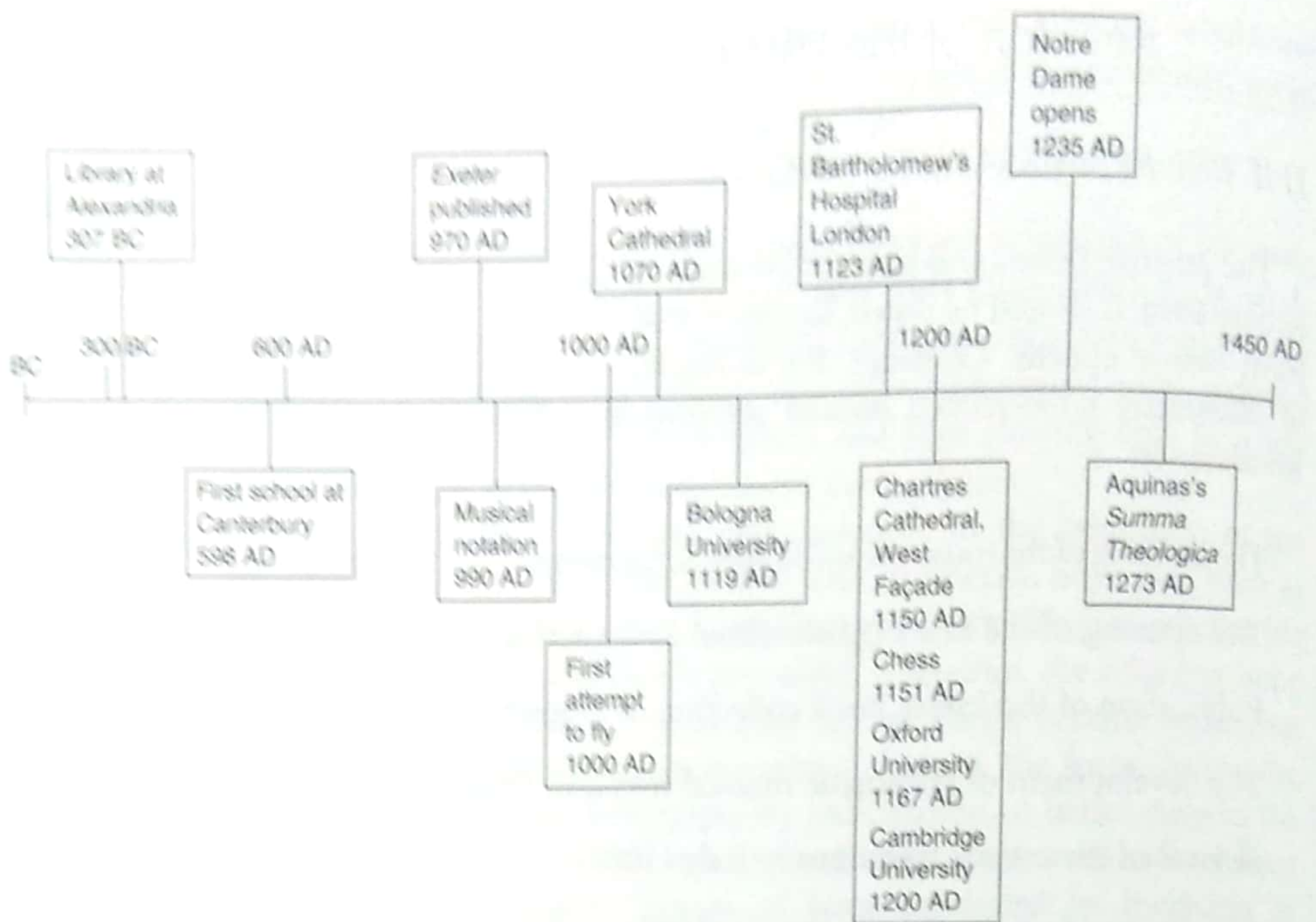


Figure 2.1 The Pre-Renaissance Period

Source: Compiled from Hale (1965).

THE RENAISSANCE

Beginning in Italy around 1450 and extending to approximately 1600, the Renaissance produced changes in the customs and institutions that had dominated Europe for the previous millennium. Feudalism, the dominance of the Catholic Church, and rural, isolated living all gave way to an emerging nationalism, trade and commerce, the growth of cities, and the expansion of arts and scholarship. Hope came alive during this period of rebirth. This historical period now is viewed more as an evolution than a revolution, and it was a turning point that facilitated the emergence of active hope.

Given that, in the Renaissance, part of the emphasis was on the past, how could it be seen as the beginning of "modern" hope? The answer to this question is that, although the Renaissance did analyze antiquity, much of the analysis was done to move forward and advance understanding. For example, Roman law emerged as a crucial area for legal studies because Renaissance lawyers wanted to examine the great codes of Roman law, the Digest and the Codex. Thus, the Renaissance perspective was that learning from the past was necessary to meet the demands of the complex, materialistic society that was emerging from the late Middle Ages. Similarly,

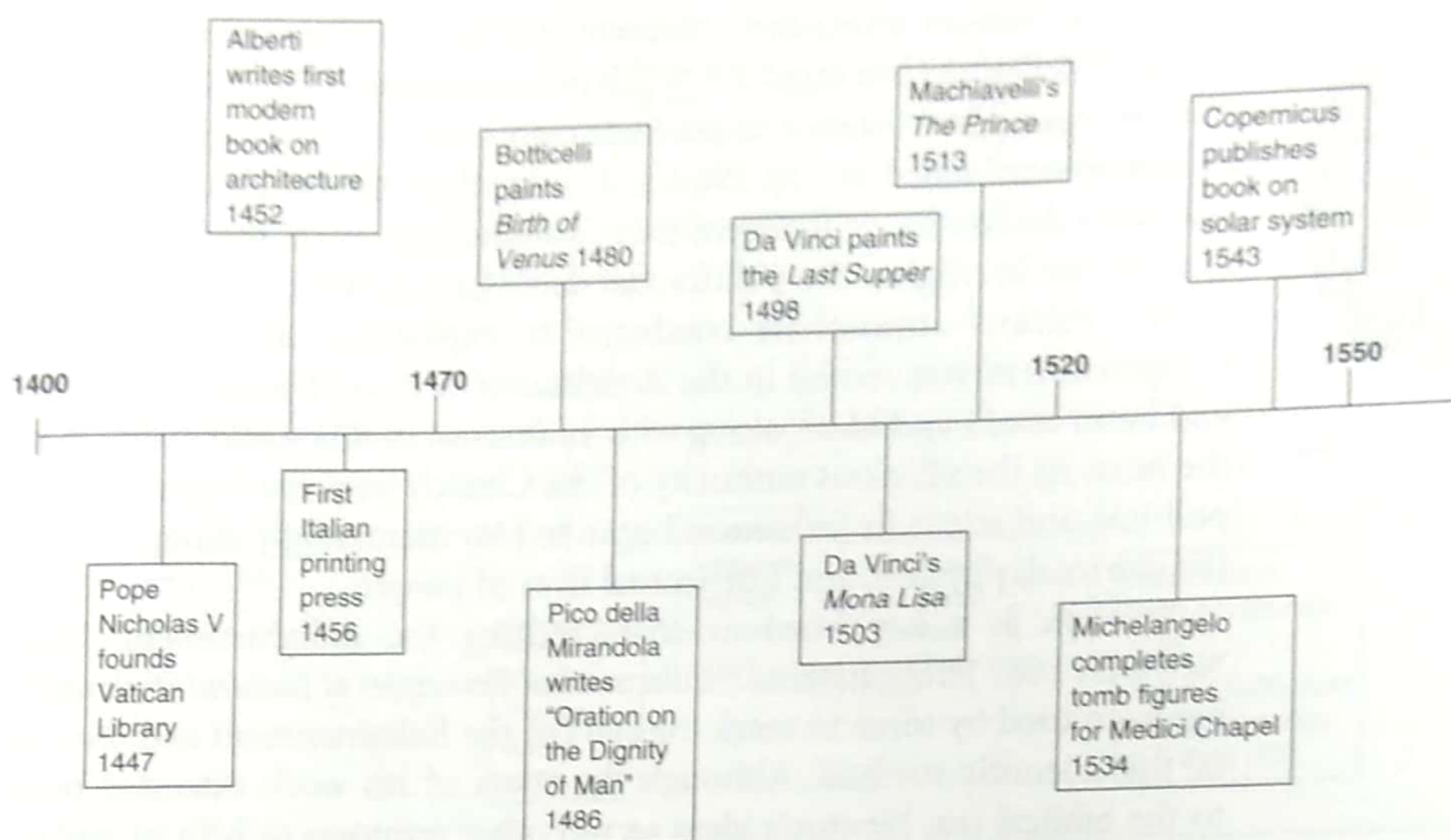


Figure 2.2 The Renaissance

Source: Compiled from Grun (1975) and Hale (1965).

advances in other areas of public life and business were built on accurate understandings of previous literature, philosophy, and art. Although studies of these fields became goals in themselves, they were undertaken primarily to accomplish more worldly objectives, such as facilitation of trade and mercantilist economics. Therefore, Renaissance society began to see worldly fulfillment as more important than preparation for death or fulfillment after death.

During this period, people also began to view themselves as individuals rather than as representatives of a class. Moreover, this emerging interest in the merits of personal achievement led to a focus on doing things related to *this* life. Whereas medieval (500–1500 AD) men and women searched their souls, Renaissance citizens looked outward and forward to achieve the here-and-now goals that were based on their abilities and personal interests. See Figure 2.2 for important events and accomplishments of the Renaissance.

THE ENLIGHTENMENT

The period following the Renaissance, from approximately 1700 to the late 1700s, is known as the Age of Enlightenment. This era marked the



Immanuel Kant

Source: © Corbis.

emergence from an immaturity characterized by unwillingness to use one's own knowledge and intelligence. On this point, Immanuel Kant (1784) wrote, "*Sapere aude!* 'Have courage to use your own reason!'—that is the motto of enlightenment" (cited in Gay, 1969, p. 11). In effect, the Enlightenment represented a declaration of independence from the long-established acceptance of authority in religion and politics that dated back to biblical times.

In a cultural atmosphere conducive to exploration and change, the Enlightenment was rooted in the Renaissance revival of interest in Greek and Latin books and ideas, along with an interest in this world rather than the next. As the religious authority of the Church weakened, commercial, political, and scientific influences began to play increasingly strong roles in the spiritual, physical, and intellectual lives of people.

Scientific is a key word in characterizing the Enlightenment. Isaac Newton's 1687 publication of *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* has been used by some to mark the start of the Enlightenment and the rise of the scientific method. Although the roots of his work extended back to the biblical era, Newton's ideas served other purposes to help in understanding and revering God.

The Scientific Revolution was an integral part of the Enlightenment, and it began when the political atmosphere became more favorable to a climate of discovery as manifested in the works of such scholars as Kepler, Galileo, Newton, and Descartes. Gay (1966) describes this group of thinkers as a kind of "coalition" of scientists and philosophers who viewed research efforts as "steps" in a cumulative process rather than mere accidental and isolated discoveries.

The Enlightenment reflected the nature of hope because of its emphases on rational agencies and rational abilities. These qualities were interwoven in the dominant belief of the age, that reason brought to life with the scientific method led to the achievements in science and philosophy. These latter perspectives are in direct contrast to the prevalence of ignorance, superstition, and the acceptance of authority that characterized the Middle Ages. Described in terms of the use of mathematics as a means of discovery and progress, this process emphasized the rational will. It should come as no surprise, then, that education, free speech, and the acceptance of new ideas burgeoned during the Enlightenment. Indeed, the consequences of such enlightened thinking were long lasting and reflective of the power of hope. On this last point, consider education and how it decreases the probability that actions will be impulsive; that is to say, education should promote thoughtful analyses and plans to reach desired goals. Furthermore, human dignity and worth were recognized during the Enlightenment. Taken together, the idea that knowledge and planning could produce perceived empowerment led Francis Bacon to the goal of improving the human condition. It is no wonder, therefore, that Condorcet noted in his *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1795) that the Enlightenment assured the present and future progress of human beings.

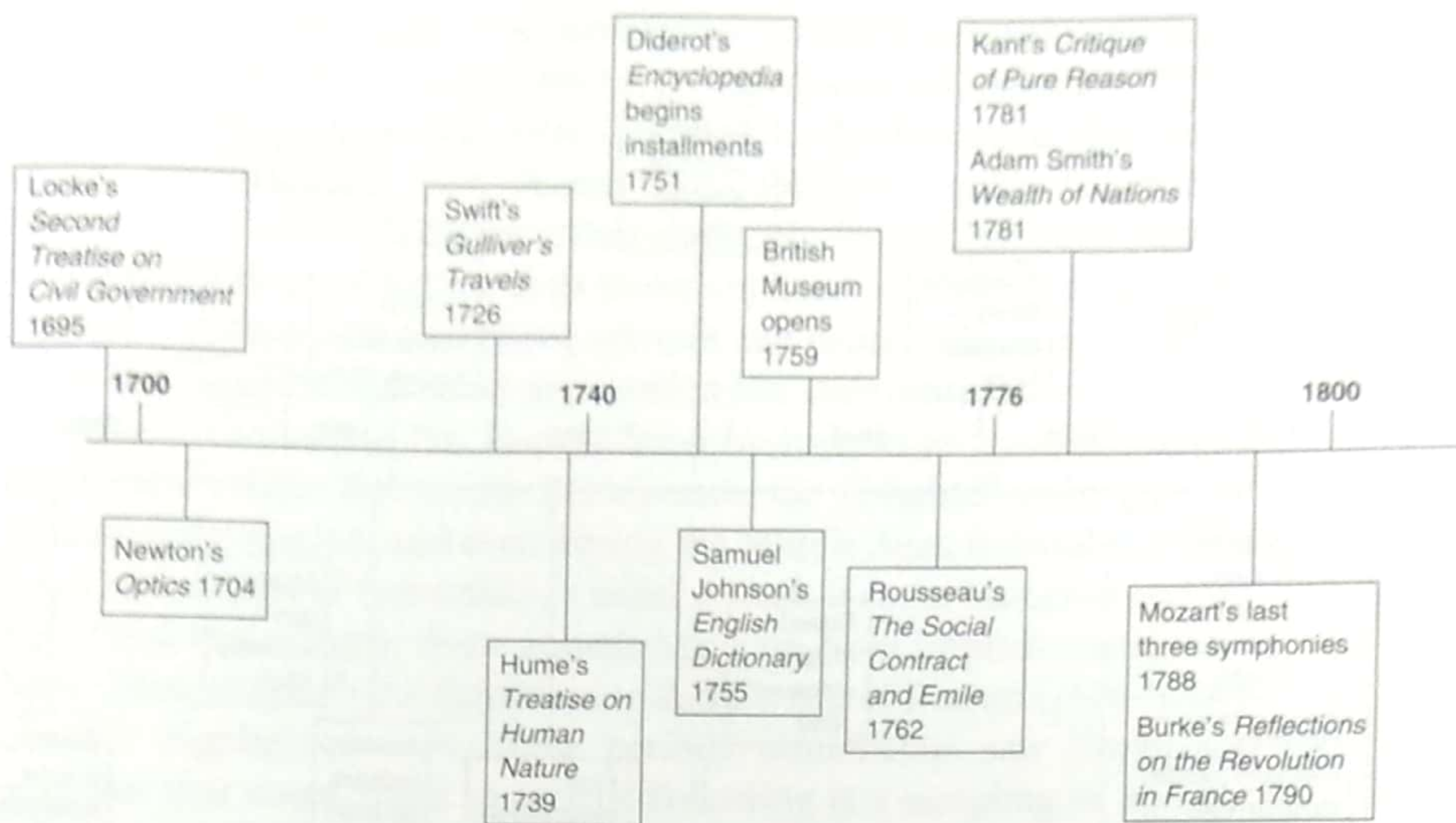


Figure 2.3 The Enlightenment

Source: Compiled from Grun (1975) and Gay (1966).

The results of hopeful beliefs can be seen in the impact of these significant events of the Enlightenment:

The invention of the flying shuttle (1773), which initiated modern weaving

The drafting of the Declaration of Independence (1776)

The ridiculing of fashionable society by poet Alexander Pope in the *Rape of the Lock* (1714)

The opening of the British Museum (1759)

Publication of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781)

The writing of Mozart's last three symphonies (1788)

Publication of Edmund Burke's *Reflection on the Revolution in France* (1790)

Other events and milestones are noted in Figure 2.3.

THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

Beginning approximately in the late 1700s and continuing to the end of the 1800s was the period known as **Industrial Revolution** (or the Age of

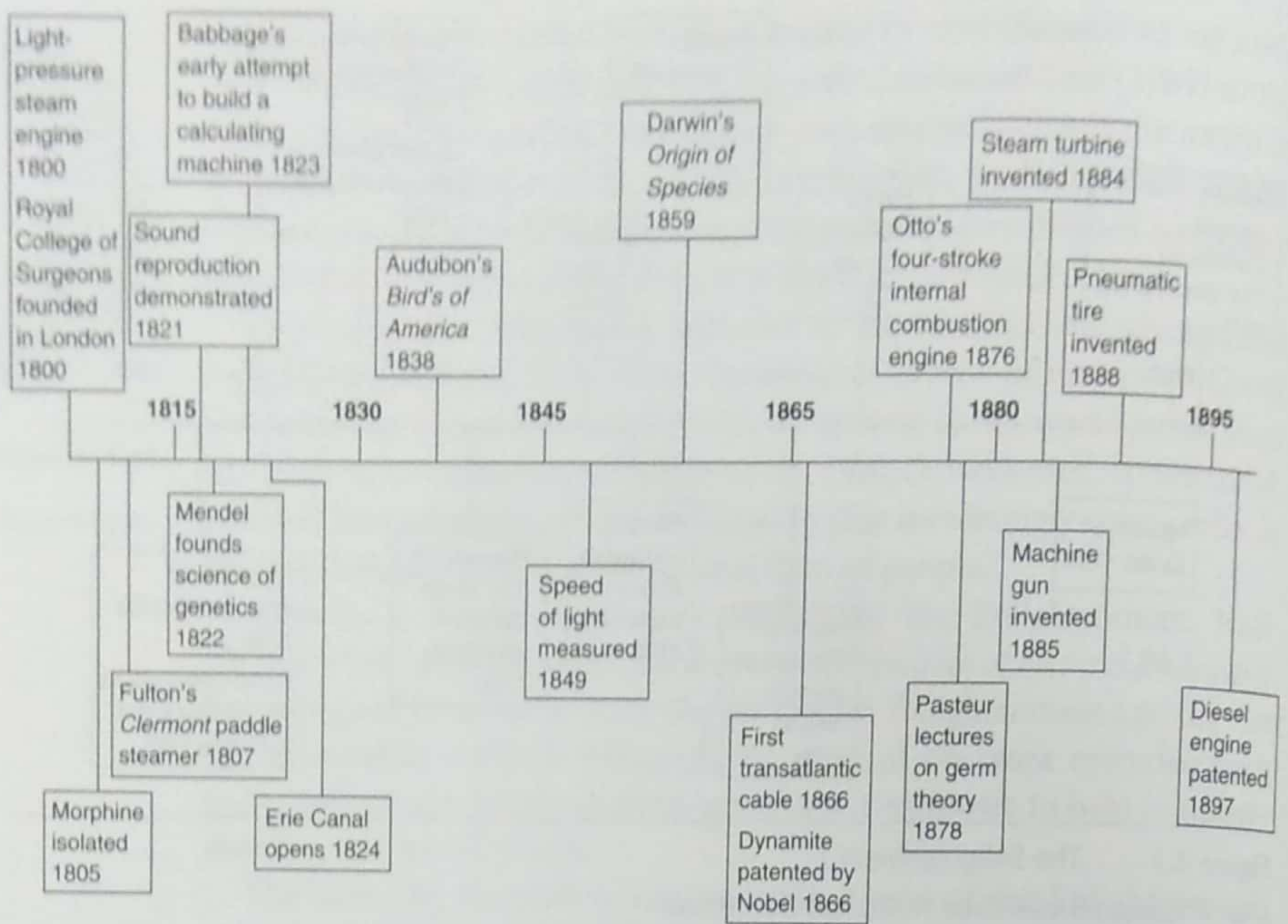


Figure 2.4 The Industrial Revolution

Source: Compiled from Grun (1975) and Burchell (1966).

Industrialization). The movement of production from homes and small workshops to large factories vastly increased material benefits for individual citizens (see Figure 2.4). Although some results of this age were dysfunctional and counterproductive, very real and important contributions took place. Brogan (1960) describes these advances:

As a result of advances made in the 19th and early 20th centuries, people did live longer, fewer children died as infants, and many were better fed, better housed and better educated. The physical unity of the world was made possible by the steamboat, the locomotive, the automobile, and the airplane. The unity of science was exemplified by the adaptation, within a few years of its discovery, of Louis Pasteur's work with bacteria in Paris to Joseph Lister's practice of antiseptic surgery in Scotland. Areas of the world previously uninhabitable, or habitable only at a very low level of existence, became easier to live in. (in Burchell, 1966, p. 7)

As Bronowski (1973) wrote eloquently in his chapter "The Drive for Power" in *The Ascent of Man*, the Industrial Revolution made the world

“ours.” Indeed, the Industrial Revolution reflected a turning point in the progress of humankind because it provided so many material and personal benefits. Perhaps even more important, the Industrial Revolution created amenities that most citizens could obtain and enjoy. Goods thus become available for the many rather than only for the few. Such benefits included the steam engine and its many applications, iron and steelmaking, and railroads (efficient transportation and communication for all), to name but a few examples that appeared in the 20th century.

Western civilization has been defined by its critical mass of hopeful events and beliefs. Before the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution, and even during the Middle Ages, hopeful thinking was a critical part of humankind’s belief system. If some historical eras do not reveal major signs, there nonetheless have been implicit markers of hope. Thus, although the Reformation and the Age of Reason (1600–1700) are not highlighted here, these periods nonetheless saw important advances that contributed to society. Following is a sampling of notable achievements in these periods:

Francis Bacon’s *The Advancement of Learning* (1604)

Galileo’s proportional compass (1606)

The beginning of extensive road building in France (1606)

Galileo’s astronomical telescope (1608)

Harvey’s discovery of the circulation of blood (1619)

Publication of the *Weekly News* in London (1622)

The opening of the first coffee shop in London (1632)

The abolition of torture in England (1638)

The chartering of Harvard College (1650)

Newton’s experiments with gravitation and his invention of differential calculus (1665)

Establishment of the Greenwich observatory (1681)

The opening of the first coffeehouses in Vienna (1683)

Implementation of streetlights in London (1684)

The first modern trade fair, in Leiden, Holland (1689)

Peter the Great’s sending of 50 Russian students to study in England, Holland, and Venice (1698)

Looking back at the events of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution, perhaps it is reasonable to consider all eras, starting with the Renaissance and continuing until 1900, as part of a new

period called the Age of Progress. This Age of Progress characterizes Western civilization and reflects the inherent component of hopeful thinking. As Nisbet (1980) writes in his *History of the Idea of Progress*,

No single idea has been more important than, perhaps as important as, the Idea of Progress in Western Civilization for 3,000 years. Its flaws and corruptions understood, the idea of progress has been overwhelmingly a noble idea in Western history, noble for what it has celebrated in countless philosophical, religious, scientific, and historical works, and most of all for what it has meant to the motivations and aspirations of those who have made up the human substance of Western Civilization. (p. 4)

This faith in the value and promise of our civilization is essential for the concept of hope, and vice versa. Thus, hope is the essence of faith in the value and promise of our Western civilization.

Conclusions

Hope is the belief that life can be better, along with the motivations and efforts to make it so. More than desires, wishes, or daydreams, hope taps thinking that leads to meaningful actions. A wish envisions change but may not lead to action. One may wish to win the lottery, but this does not necessarily lead to important or sustained activities to fulfill this wish. Furthermore, the conditions surrounding the fulfillment of a wish are not promising, because there may be few reasonable or even realistic means for doing so.

It should be noted that Western European civilization does not have a monopoly on the idea of hope. In every civilization and historical period, there have been hopeful beliefs and activities. But hope often does not appear to be as significant a driving belief in all cultural perspectives. For example, in the Native American culture there is less expectation of progress. Rather, if one respects and takes care of the environment, things should be all right but not necessarily great. The Native American belief is that proper traditions and beliefs may not bring prosperity but will help stave off disasters. Here, then, the difference in the two systems may be more one of degree than of kind. For Native Americans, positive actions are not assumed to lead to positive outcomes as much as they are in Western European civilization's system of beliefs. Accordingly, hope may not be as prominent a motivational force within the Native American tradition as has been the case for other peoples in Western civilization (Pierotti, personal communication, 2005).

The idea of hope has served as an underpinning for thinking in Western civilization. As Bronowski (1973) has noted in regard to the Industrial

Revolution, hope helped to make our world ours. Where hope will take us, in turn, is perhaps the most important question about the unfolding 21st century.

Key Terms

Age of Enlightenment: The period from 1700 to the late 1800s. The Enlightenment brought with it the idea that people could use their own reason, knowledge, and intellect instead of relying on superstition or the authority of the Church and government. The Enlightenment included the Scientific Revolution. Hope was reflected in the belief that people had the ability to use their own rationality to improve themselves and their world.

Hope: As defined by Snyder, goal-directed thinking in which a person has the perceived capacity to find routes to desired goals (pathway thinking) and the requisite motivations to use those routes (agency thinking). Snyder believes that hope is not genetically based but an entirely learned and deliberate way of thinking. (See Chapter 9.)

Industrial Revolution: Part of the Age of Enlightenment; the movement of production from the home and workshop to the factory, which resulted in increased material benefits for the individual and greater mobility due to the invention of the steamboat, locomotive, and airplane. The Industrial Revolution made the hope of the Renaissance (prosperity and happiness in the here and now) possible for most people.

Middle Ages: The period from 500 to 1500 AD; sometimes called the Dark Ages. Social, physical, and intellectual immobility and various forms of oppression mark this period of time. Hope was tied to prosperity and happiness in the afterlife.

Renaissance: The period from 1450 to approximately 1600, which produced many changes in the customs that dominated Europe. During this period, people analyzed the past to move forward and advance the future. Hope was now tied to prosperity and happiness in the here and now. Hopeful thoughts were accompanied by motivation for action in this life instead of preparation for the afterlife.

Wish: The envisioning of the possibility for change without the pathway for action; a passive desire.