

## CONTENTS

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<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
<i>Introduction</i>	1
<i>Stephen Macedo</i>	
<i>Chapter 1 Why Trust Science? Perspectives from the History and Philosophy of Science</i>	15
<i>Chapter 2 Science Awry</i>	69
<i>Coda: Values in Science</i>	147
<b>Comments</b>	
<i>Chapter 3 The Epistemology of Frozen Peas: Innocence, Violence, and Everyday Trust in Twentieth-Century Science</i>	163
<i>Susan Lindee</i>	
<i>Chapter 4 What Would Reasons for Trusting Science Be?</i>	181
<i>Marc Lange</i>	
<i>Chapter 5 Pascal's Wager Reframed: Toward Trustworthy Climate Policy Assessments for Risk Societies</i>	191
<i>Ottmar Edenhofer and Martin Kowarsch</i>	

<i>Chapter 6 Comments on the Present and Future of Science, Inspired by Naomi Oreskes</i>	202
<i>Jon A. Krosnick</i>	
Response	
<i>Chapter 7 Reply</i>	215
<i>Afterword</i>	245
<i>Notes</i>	257
<i>References</i>	297
<i>Contributors</i>	335
<i>Index</i>	337

# INTRODUCTION

Stephen Macedo

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Science confronts a public crisis of trust. From the Oval Office in Washington and on news media around the world, the scientific consensus on climate change, the effectiveness of vaccines, and other important matters are routinely challenged and misrepresented. Doubts about science are sown by tobacco companies, the fossil fuels industry, free market think tanks, and other powerful organizations with economic interests and ideological commitments that run counter to scientific findings.<sup>1</sup>

Yet we know that scientists sometimes make mistakes, and that particular scientific findings now widely believed will turn out to be wrong. So why, when, and to what extent should we trust science?

These questions could hardly be more timely or important. As extreme weather events become more common, sea levels rise, and climate-induced migrations flow across borders, nations around the world confront mounting costs and humanitarian crises. Yet so-called experts do not always agree. A local television meteorologist may report that it is merely “some speculation from scientists” that global warming is contributing to extreme weather events, such as the “polar vortex” that hit the Upper Midwest and Northeast of the United States in late January 2019. On another channel, a scientist at a well-regarded research center insists that “we know why . . . . It’s all because of human activities increasing the greenhouse gases in the atmosphere that trap a lot more heat down by the surface.”<sup>2</sup>

As vitally important as climate science is to the future of humanity, that is only the tip of the iceberg. Are vaccines effective? Does the birth control pill cause depression? Is flossing good for your teeth? On these questions and so many others, scientists may agree yet doubts circulate. Who should we believe and why?

In *Why Trust Science?* Professor Naomi Oreskes provides clear and compelling answers to the questions of when and why scientific findings are reliable. She explains the basis for trust in science in highly readable prose, and illustrates her argument with vivid examples of science working as it should, and as it should not, on matters central to our lives. Readers will find here a vigorous defense of the trustworthiness of scientific consensus based not on any particular method or on the qualities of scientists, but on science's character as a collective enterprise.

A distinguished scientist and historian of science, Professor Naomi Oreskes has also emerged as one of the world's clearest and most influential voices on the role of science in society and the reality of man-made climate change.

This book grows out of the Princeton University Tanner Lectures on Human Values delivered by Professor Oreskes in late November 2016. On that occasion, four distinguished commentators, representing a variety of fields and perspectives, responded to Professor Oreskes's two lectures. This book contains the lectures, the four commentaries, and an extended reply by Professor Oreskes, all revised and expanded.<sup>3</sup>

Readers will find in the chapters that follow an overview of the leading philosophical debates concerning the nature of scientific understanding, scientific method, and the role of scientific communities. Oreskes defends the role of values in science, discusses the relationship between science and religion, and sets out her own credo as a scientist and defender of science. Our four commentators offer their perspectives on these issues, and

Oreskes closes with comments on the plight and promise of science in our time. A more detailed overview follows.

Why should we trust science? Professor Oreskes's initial answer is crisp and clear: scientific knowledge is "fundamentally consensual" and understanding science properly can help us "address the current crisis of trust."

Chapter 1 develops the problem of trust against the background of an account of philosophical debates about the nature of science and scientific method. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and before, trust often resided in "great men": science was regarded as trustworthy insofar as the scientists were. Gradually the alternative idea was advanced that careful observation and adherence to scientific methods were the bases of progress. Oreskes also surveys the varieties of empiricism that dominated philosophies of science in the first half of the twentieth century, and the challenge advanced by Karl Popper, who regarded the essence of science not as verification but openness to falsifiability, or "fallibilism."

Most important, on Oreskes's account, was the emergence of the idea of science as a collective enterprise. The "sociological view" of science was first advanced by Ludwik Fleck, in the 1930s, who held that the "truly isolated investigator is impossible . . . Thinking is a collective activity." Oreskes endorses the idea that scientific progress depends on the collective institutions and practices of science, "such as peer-reviewed journals, and scientific societies through which scientists share data, grapple with criticisms, and adjust their views."

The central importance of scientific communities, their world-views, and practices is the core of Professor Oreskes's view. When we focus on what scientists do, we find a variety of methods pursued with creativity and flexibility. She explores debates surrounding philosophies of science in the work of

Pierre Duhem, W.V.O. Quine, Thomas Kuhn, and others. She describes the social epistemology developed by feminist philosophers and historians of science, including the contributions of Helen Longino, who helped establish the idea that, as Oreskes puts it, “objectivity is maximized . . . when the community is sufficiently diverse that a broad range of views can be developed, heard and appropriately considered.” Or, as she says later, “In Diversity There Is Epistemic Strength.”

Professor Oreskes thus defends the “social turn” in our understanding of science while also describing the sense of threat that greeted the idea that scientific realities are socially constructed. Remember the obvious, she advises: scientists are engaged in sustained and careful study of the natural world. The empirical dimension is critical, but scientific expertise is also communally organized: objectivity arises from social practices of criticism and correction, most successfully in scientific communities that are diverse, “non-defensive,” and self-critical.

We are warranted in placing “informed trust” in the “critically achieved consensus of the scientific community,” argues Professor Oreskes. Individual scientists make mistakes, especially when “they stray outside their domains of expertise,” and Oreskes provides some glaring examples. And science has no monopoly on insight into the natural world. Nevertheless, the practices and procedures of scientific communities increase the odds that scientific consensus is reliable.

We should trust the conclusions of the scientific community rather than the petroleum industry when it comes to climate change because the petroleum industry has a conflict of interest. It aims to profit by finding, developing, and selling petroleum resources, and it generally does that well. But those aims conflict with the pursuit of truth regarding climate change. As a general rule, we should be skeptical of the scientific claims of

organizations guided by the profit motive or ones precommitted to an ideological point of view. Good science presupposes “that participants are interested in learning and have a shared interest in truth. It assumes that the participants do not have a major, intellectually compromising conflict of interest.”

And yet, scientists sometimes get things wrong, so, Professor Oreskes asks in chapter 2, how do we know that they are not wrong now? If our knowledge is perishable and incomplete, how “can we warrant relying on it to make decisions, particularly when the issues at stake are often socially or politically sensitive, economically consequential, and deeply personal?”

To investigate these important questions, Oreskes examines five examples of science gone awry: what do these examples have in common, and what can we learn from them?

The first is the “Limited Energy Theory,” popular in the late nineteenth century, which held that women should not participate in higher education, on the grounds that energy expended on studying would adversely affect their fertility. The withering criticism to which this theory was subjected by Dr. Mary Putnam Jacobi had, as the reader will learn, little immediate effect on male scientists.

Another example is the rejection of continental drift. Many American scientists in particular were hostile to the theory, which they argued was based on flawed “European” methodology.

A third example is eugenics, which is most closely associated nowadays with the Nazis, but which had a wide variety of advocates and practitioners in the United States and other Western countries. Oreskes provides a fascinating account of the complex politics of eugenics in the United States and Europe.

Oreskes’s fourth example is hormonal birth control and the evidence that it often causes depression. Many women experience the onset of depression after beginning certain birth

control formulas, and Professor Oreskes relates her own experience. Yet medical science long discounted as unreliable the self-reports of millions of women.

Oreskes's final case is dental floss and the flurry of news reports asserting that there is no hard evidence that flossing is effective. Probing deeper, Oreskes argues that the lack of randomized trials to test for the effects of flossing hardly amounts to a lack of evidence.

From these diverse cases, Professor Oreskes draws some general lessons, which she groups under the themes of consensus, method, evidence, values, and humility.

The importance of hard-won scientific consensus, as an indicator of trustworthiness, holds up very well across the five cases. Oreskes also provides a fascinating discussion of the difficult question—*vital to the role of science in a democracy*—of non-expert opinion and how scientists should respond to it. Non-scientists—from nurses and midwives to farmers and fishermen—often have information or evidence relevant to science-based decisions. Patients have vital information about their symptoms. Yet, “Just because someone is close to an issue does not mean he or she understands it; conventional notions of objectivity assume distance for just this reason.” The cases help illustrate and sharpen the distinction between reliable scientific authority and the interest and ideology-based pseudoscientific dissent we witness surrounding climate change, evolution, and vaccines.

Drawing from her five examples, Oreskes warns of the “methodological fetishism” that leads some scientists to dismiss valuable forms of evidence because they do not fit their methodological precommitments. Evidence comes in a variety of forms.



Values inevitably play a role in shaping science, Oreskes insists. In looking back on eugenics, scientists may say that science was distorted by values, but values were also central to opposing eugenics and also the Limited Energy Theory. Because values play an inevitable role, diverse scientific communities are more likely to be able to detect unexamined assumptions, blind spots, and inherited biases: “A community with diverse values is more likely to identify and challenge prejudicial beliefs embedded in, or masquerading as, scientific theory.” She also allows that there can be legitimate non-scientific objections—including ones based on religious or moral values—to policies that are justified partly by science but also by particular value claims.

And humility is important. Diverse scientific communities can correct for the blind spots of arrogant scientists, but the history of science counsels humility: the greatest scientists (and, one might add, philosophers) have sometimes become fetishists about method, drawn false conclusions from evidence, and fallen prey to the prejudices and biases of their times.<sup>4</sup> Even the best of scientists should remember that a complete grasp of the whole truth is yet far beyond us.

So, when should we trust science? In concluding chapter 2, Oreskes summarizes: when an expert consensus emerges in a scientific community that is diverse and characterized by ample opportunities for peer review and openness to criticism. Of course, any particular scientific claim may be false, so she reminds us of Pascal’s Wager: consider the stakes of error. It may not be certain that flossing will be good for your teeth, but it is cheap and easy. It may not be certain that human actions and policy changes can reverse the dire effects of climate change, but consider the calamities that await our children and grandchildren if we now ignore scientific predictions that are correct.

In a coda to her two lectures, Professor Oreskes returns to the issue of scientists' values. In theory, scientific findings are one thing and the question of what if anything to do about them is another. So one might suppose that whereas the practical question of "what is to be done" inevitably implicates values, the question of what scientific evidence shows need not. Ideally, science should be able to leave political and moral controversies to others.

Things are not so neat and simple, however. Professor Oreskes observes that people equate science with what they think are its implications. Fundamentalist and evangelical Christians from Williams Jennings Bryan to Rick Santorum have worried that evolutionary accounts of human origins undermine human dignity and morality, by making humans, in Santorum's words, "mistakes of nature." Skepticism about climate science, on the other hand, is fed by the suspicion that environmentalists seek to undermine the "American way of life": big cars, motorboats, and high consumption.

In the face of such suspicions it is profoundly mistaken, argues Oreskes, for scientists to retreat to value neutrality. In the face of the question: why should ordinary people trust science and take it seriously? It cannot be effective to reply that scientists lack values! That is precisely what worries people. Moreover, it is perfectly obvious that scientists do have values—everyone does—and that those values influence their work. To hide your values, Oreskes observes, is to hide your humanity.

So, scientists should be honest about their values. Many people will share those values, and on that basis trust can be built. The Creation revered by Christians is the biodiversity cherished by Scientists, says Oreskes, and the evidence is overwhelming that these are now gravely threatened.

In concluding, Professor Oreskes offers an eloquent summary of her own credo: her guiding values as a scientist and environmentalist. “If we fail to act on our scientific knowledge and it turns out to be right, people will suffer and the world will be diminished.”

In the next section of this volume, four distinguished commentators expand upon, elaborate, or criticize central features of Professor Oreskes’s lectures.

Professor Susan Lindee is the Janice and Julian Bers Professor of History and Sociology of Science at the University of Pennsylvania, where she also holds a variety of administrative posts. Lindee argues that in responding to scientific skepticism we should draw attention to the science that we encounter and rely upon constantly in our everyday lives. We should “work our way up, from the toaster,” to the frozen peas, the smart phones, and the other miracles of modern science and technology that enhance our lives.

Of course, science’s contributions are not always so positive. Professor Lindee reminds us of the twentieth century’s brutal history of technology-enhanced warfare. She suggests that historians of science have sought to distance pure science from technological applications because of technology’s profoundly mixed legacy. Atomic scientists sought to maintain their moral purity by attributing the design of the bomb to mere engineers.

Marc Lange is the Theda Perdue Distinguished Professor and department chair in philosophy at the University of North Carolina, where he specializes in the philosophy of science. Lange notes that the question of why we should trust science seems to lead into a vicious circularity: isn’t peer review just experts vouching for other experts?

Professor Lange suggests that asking for an external vindication of science as a whole may be unreasonable: science is

self-correcting in that it can subject any particular scientific claim to critical scrutiny, “But science *cannot* reasonably be expected to put *all* its theories in jeopardy *at once*.”

Lange also raises the issue of what Thomas Kuhn described as revolutionary challenges to entire worldviews or paradigms, in which methods and theories “interpenetrate.” Using the example of Galileo, he suggests that there is typically “sparse common ground” across paradigm shifts, and scientists can use it to build an argument for one of the rival theories against the others. Lange closes by urging philosophers and others to stop overemphasizing “incommensurability and under-determination” and to devote more attention to positive accounts “of the logic underlying scientific reasoning.”

Ottmar Edenhofer is deputy director and chief economist at the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, as well as a professor at the Technical University Berlin. He offered a comment in Princeton, and is joined here by Martin Kowarsch, who is head of the working group on Scientific Assessments, Ethics, and Public Policy at the Mercator Research Institute. They begin by suggesting that the Trump administration accepts much climate science but opposes ambitious climate change mitigation efforts, partly because it heavily discounts the costs of climate change outside the United States. Thus, scientific consensus does not equal policy consensus, and so they ask how Oreskes’s account of trust in science may need to be extended or amended for science-based policy assessments. They advise experimentation aimed at incremental learning about alternative policy pathways, and argue that costly mistakes have been made due to insufficient awareness of the complexity of the policy alternatives.

Edenhofer and Kowarsch agree with Oreskes that value neutrality is impossible. They build on Deweyan pragmatism to

propose that all socially important values—“equality, liberty, purity, nationalism, etc.”—should be included in policy assessments: this may open the door to new and creative proposals.

Finally, Jon Krosnick offers some thoughts, inspired by Professor Oreskes’s lectures, on the current state and future of science. Krosnick is Frederick O. Glover Professor in Humanities and Social Sciences and professor of communication, political science, and psychology at Stanford University, where he also directs the Political Psychology Research Group.

Professor Krosnick describes a number of famous (now infamous) and influential scientific findings—in biomedicine, psychology, and elsewhere—whose results scientists have been unable to replicate. In some cases the data were fabricated, in other cases investigators admitted to repeating an experiment until the desired result was produced.

Flawed research results partly from faulty methods, argues Krosnick, and also the desire for career advancement. Academic departments and professions place a premium on publishing surprising and counterintuitive findings. Is it any wonder that many of these prove unfounded on closer inspection? Journals rarely publish negative results so refutation of bad research is slowed. He insists that scientists must face up to the problems and address the counterproductive motivations that are now rampant.

In her wide-ranging *Reply to Critics*, Professor Oreskes deepens and enriches her argument.

She praises Susan Lindee for her brilliant historical account of scientists’ attempts to distance themselves from the technological applications of their work, yet expresses doubt that becoming clearer-eyed about the science embodied in frozen peas and smart phones will have much effect on people’s attitudes to climate science. Americans do not reject science in general but

rather particular “scientific claims and conclusions that clash with their economic interests or cherished beliefs.”

In response to Marc Lange, Professor Oreskes expresses doubt that trust in scientific experts is viciously circular. The “social markers of expertise are evident to non-experts,” she argues, and it is relatively easy to figure out that climate science deniers are non-experts and that the American Enterprise Institute is pre-committed to certain policy outcomes. Expert scientific consensus does tend to be reliable.

In response to Edenhofer and Kowarsch, Professor Oreskes agrees that more work is needed on how to move from science to policy. Yet she insists that when powerful actors seek to undermine public trust in the science associated with progressive climate policy, the *roots* of their skepticism are typically not in distrust of science but rather in economic self-interest and ideological commitments. Oreskes reiterates that if scientists are honest about their values, as she recommends, then they will often find that there is considerable overlap on the values behind climate policy disagreements, and this may help us build greater trust.

Professor Oreskes turns, finally, to Jon Krosnick’s assertion that science faces a “replication crisis.” While allowing that there have been notable examples, often involving the misuse of statistics, she points out that the rate of retractions—that is, retractions as a percentage of published articles—is tiny: perhaps less than .01%. If the rate has risen, that may reflect a salutary increase in critical scrutiny of findings, rather than a higher incidence of faulty research. Or it may reflect unwarranted media coverage of flashy single-paper results in psychology and biomedicine.

Oreskes pushes back against Krosnick’s wider suggestions about a crisis in science. His examples furnish no evidence that

fraud is commoner in science than elsewhere. Moreover, in some of Krosnick's examples fraud was discovered and punished expeditiously. Refutation and retraction are paths to progress. She reminds us that her argument has been that we should trust scientific *consensus*, not the single studies to which Krosnick draws attention, and reiterates that motivated industry funding of research is a serious problem.

In an afterword penned just before this book went to press, Professor Oreskes notes that the problem of trust in science—and in news and information more generally—has exploded since she delivered the Princeton Tanner Lectures in the fall of 2016. Many more Americans believe in the reality of climate change than once did, but America is led by a science and fact-denying chief executive who is reversing hard-won progress on climate policy. It remains the case that much doubt about consensus findings in science is manufactured by those with financial or ideological interests in derailing science-based policies, just as she and Erik Conway argued in *Merchants of Doubt*.

Professor Oreskes closes by reiterating that science merits our trust when scientific results achieve consensus among the expert members of diverse and self-critical scientific communities. And she offers a final example—controversies over the use of sunscreen—to illustrate this book's core theme.

Like all excellent books, this one addresses many questions and also raises some. While Professor Oreskes argues that progress and reliability in science depends more on the qualities of scientific communities than on the character of individual scientists, she also argues that scientists' inevitably have values and that they should be honest about them. Do not well-working scientific communities depend on the predominance of good values—of intellectual honesty and truth seeking—among scientists? And if diversity is important in scientific communities,

of what kinds? The inclusion of women and members of racial, ethnic, religious, and other minority populations has obviously been very good for all of the sciences, and scholarship generally. Are there social sciences (and perhaps other fields of inquiry) in which greater ideological diversity would be helpful?

Readers will come away from this volume armed with a far better understanding of the vitally important enterprise of modern science and the reasons why we should trust scientific consensus. All who care about the future of humanity on this fragile earth should hope that this timely and important book gains a wide audience, before it is too late.



## INDEX

---

- absolutism, 46, 48  
acupuncture, 62  
*Adolescence* (Hall), 80  
aerodynamics, 220–21  
*Against Method* (Feyerabend), 47  
*Aim and Structure of Physical Theory, The* (Duhem), 33  
air pollution, 194  
Aldredge, Wayne, 126  
Allen, Garland, 101–2  
alternative facts, 245  
American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 217  
American Association for the Advancement of Science, 177  
American Chemical Society, 177  
American Civil War, 19  
American Dental Association, 126  
American Enterprise Institute, 12, 17–18, 182, 222  
American Museum of Natural History, 91  
American Philosophical Society (APS), 172  
American Society of Microbiology, 177  
Amgen Pharmaceuticals, 205–6, 236, 242–43  
anthropologists, 23, 48, 55, 57, 62, 96, 247  
anti-intellectualism, 165  
Applied Physics Laboratory, 169–70  
Associated Press (AP), 118–20  
AstraZeneca, 241  
Atomic Energy Commission, 170, 285n14  
attitude polarization and, 204–5  
Australian Cancer Council, 253  
authoritarianism, 27, 84, 259n31  
autism, 15, 63, 108, 129, 132, 154, 275n114  
Ayer, A. J., 24–25, 29, 236  
Ayurvedic medicine, 62  
AZT, 64  
  
Bacon, Francis, 22, 33  
Baliani, Gianbattista, 188  
Barad, Karen, 280n202  
Bargh, John, 203  
Barnes, Barry, 44–45  
Bayer Pharmaceuticals, 206, 236  
BBC, 204, 231–32, 290n22  
Bechtel, Bill, 276n137  
Beck, Glenn, 282n23  
Bem, Daryl, 203  
Berger, Peter L., 262n70

- Bernal, J. D., 97
- Bernard, Claude, 36, 52
- Berry, Edward, 82
- bias: assimilation and, 204–5;  
balancing of, 59; birth control and, 107–8; class, 97, 249; Comte and, 20; continental drift and, 82; dental floss and, 120; diversity and, 249; epistemologies and, 51–59, 175, 178–79; eugenics and, 97; false conclusions and, 7; fraud and, 13, 231, 235–36, 240, 290n21, 291n37; homogeneous groups and, 249; humility and, 7; industry funding and, 73, 208, 210, 236–40; inherent, 7; journals and, 209, 235, 263n91; Limited Energy Theory and, 249; mass media and, 232, 236, 263n91; ontological relativism and, 263n89; personal, 144; rationalistic, 284n4; reliable knowledge and, 135; replication issues and, 11–12, 204–7, 228, 232, 236, 239, 290n23; sampling, 107; scientific papers and, 204–6; Stanford prison experiment and, 232
- Bible, 148, 158, 282n26
- Big Bang theory, 190
- Billings, Marland, 86
- biodiversity, 8, 156, 158, 195, 223–25
- Biological Basis of Human Nature* (Jennings), 102, 274n99
- biomedicine, 11–12, 121, 146, 229–30, 235–36, 292n46
- biometrics, 92, 97
- birth control: bias and, 107–8; consensus and, 128; Danish study of, 107–9, 114–15; depression and, 2, 5–6, 104–17, 140; hypotheses and, 116; male, 113, 276n129; mood changes and, 107, 109, 112, 114; patients and, 104, 108–11, 114–15, 117; psychiatrists and, 109–12; public health officials and, 117; scientific method and, 107–8, 113–14, 117; Seaman and, 109–11, 136; self-reporting and, 107–9, 113; suicide and, 109–10, 113, 117, 275n121; Swedish study on, 110
- blood pressure, 113, 250–54, 294n14
- Bloor, David, 44, 46, 220, 258n13, 263n83
- Boas, Franz, 96–97
- Bohm, David, 171
- Brewer, Priscilla, 284n3
- British Association of Dermatologists, 254
- bronchitis, 65
- Bronowski, Jacob, 167
- Brookhaven Laboratory, 170
- Brown, Nick, 234
- Bryan, William Jennings, 8
- Buckley, William F., 263n91
- Buck v. Bell*, 78, 88, 272n75
- Building of the Brain, The* (Clarke), 270n40
- Busch, Jane, 284n3
- Bush, George H. W., 148
- Bush, Vannevar, 167–68
- caloric theory of heat, 19
- cancer, 243, 281n14; chemotherapy and, 170; Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and, 115; GcMAF and, 243; periodontal disease and, 123; skin, 252–54; sunscreen and, 252–54; tobacco industry and, 65, 115, 239
- Carnap, Rudolf, 25
- Carson, Ben, 15

- Cartwright, Nancy, 126, 164, 278n166
- Castelli, Benedetto, 188
- Catholicism, 64, 148, 151, 156–58, 273n78, 291n13
- Cato Institute, 282n23, 293n3
- cavities, 70, 119–20, 122, 126
- Cell* journal, 205, 242
- cell phones, 217–19
- Chamberlin, Thomas Chrowder, 84–86, 103
- chemical weapons, 166–67, 169, 177
- Chernobyl, 279n192
- Christians, 8, 21, 129, 148–49, 153, 155–57, 228, 273n78, 282n26
- Ciancio, Sebastian G., 125–26
- circularity, 9, 181–82, 185, 221–22
- civilizational knowledge, 62–63
- Clarke, Edward H.: *The Building of the Brain* and, 270n40; and higher education for women, 76–80, 89, 135–39, 226–27, 270n33, 270n40; *Jacobi* and, 5, 79–80, 136, 249; menstruation and, 78–80; *Sex in Education; or, a Fair Chance for Girls* and, 76–78, 270n33, 270n40
- classical mechanics, 19
- Clausius, Rudolf, 76
- climate change: American consumers and, 148; anthropogenic, 17, 65, 72, 95, 129, 140, 142, 148, 154–55, 193, 217, 223–26, 230, 245; authority issues and, 69, 71–72; carbon sequestration and, 240; confusion over, 15, 18, 69, 71–73, 119, 142–43, 155; consensus on, 1, 6–7, 10, 12–13, 18, 95, 129–30, 142, 149, 175, 192, 224, 226, 228, 293n3; Cruz and, 293n3; denial of, 6, 87, 119, 153, 155–58, 175, 179, 222, 225, 245, 266n130, 282n23, 293n3; Earth's surface temperatures and, 230; economic issues and, 1, 12, 17–18, 63, 145, 191–92, 218, 224–25; environmentalists and, 18; evidence and, 6, 17, 63, 65, 140, 142, 145, 153–54, 192, 195, 217, 229–30, 235, 293n3; extreme weather and, 1, 15, 140, 245; global warming and, 1, 229–30, 293n3; as hoax, 119, 245, 293n3; human activities and, 1–2; Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and, 17, 59, 194, 225–26, 287n3; liberals and, 145; Mercator Research Institute on Global Commons and Climate Change and, 10; Papal Encyclical on Climate Change and, 228; petroleum industry and, 4, 17–18, 63, 65, 67, 142, 225; polar vortex and, 1; policy assessments and, 191–95, 200, 223–24; politics and, 18, 63, 95, 190, 218, 293n3; Pope Francis and, 157, 228; published papers on, 112; religion and, 155–58, 217–18, 227–28; reversing effects of, 7; skepticism and, 4, 8, 12, 17, 73, 140, 148, 153, 192–93, 266n130, 283n29, 284n1; social costs of carbon (SCC) and, 191–92; sunspots and, 63; Trump and, 10, 13, 191–92, 194, 293n3; UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and, 148, 226; values and, 148, 153–58, 282n23
- climate science: air pollution and, 194; consensus on, 112, 174; Crichton and, 95, 99, 271n57; Democrats and, 148; economics and, 12, 130, 147, 149, 218; environmentalism and, 8, 193; future of humanity and, 2; greenhouse gases and, 1, 15, 65, 134, 230; induced migrations and, 1;

- climate science (continued)  
Obama and, 191–92; petroleum industry and, 67, 130; policy assessments and, 191–201, 224; public opinion on, 12; religion and, 149, 155, 158, 217–18, 227–28; Republicans and, 148; rising sea levels and, 1; Robinson and, 174, 284n1; skepticism of, 8, 73, 235, 257n1, 284n1, 293n3; values and, 153; weather forecasting and, 152
- Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, 120–23, 126
- cognitive dissonance, 204
- Colbert, Stephen, 70
- Cold War, 151, 166, 170–71, 173, 176, 215–17
- collective activity: critical evaluation and, 68, 246–48; epistemologies and, 174; Fleck and, 3, 28–32, 39–41, 260n39, 261n69; interrogation and, 58; Longino and, 50, 52; observation of natural world and, 246; reliable knowledge and, 139; science and, 2–3, 28–32, 39, 50, 52, 58, 68, 139, 174, 203, 246–48, 260n39; social accomplishment and, 50
- Collins, Harry, 45
- communism, 29, 168, 171–73, 259n31, 285n21
- Comte, Auguste, 20–25, 29, 42, 48, 64, 182, 259n25
- Conant, James, 39
- conflict of interest, 4–5, 65–68, 121, 132–33, 237, 266n136, 290n26
- Conjectures and Refutations* (Popper), 27
- conscience clause, 218
- consensual process, 3, 19, 55, 60, 149
- consensus: age of Earth and, 16; American Enterprise Institute and, 18; birth control and, 128; climate change and, 1, 6–7, 10, 12–13, 18, 95, 129–30, 142, 149, 175, 192, 224, 226, 228, 293n3; continental drift and, 81; crisis in science and, 13; dental floss and, 128; epistemologies and, 55, 58, 164, 174–75, 222–23; ethics and, 10, 228; eugenics and, 95, 104, 142; evidence and, 6, 13, 104, 127–28, 142, 233, 250, 293n3; experts and, 4, 6–7, 12–13, 129, 141–43, 149, 192, 222–23, 234, 249, 275n109; Limited Energy Theory and, 128; peer review and, 130–31; policy assessments and, 10, 192; reliability of, 2, 4, 6, 12, 127–33; religion and, 228; scientific community and, 4, 7, 18, 55, 81, 129, 142–43, 174, 226, 250, 275n109; scientific method and, 2, 6, 55, 127, 149, 249–50; single authors and, 227; skepticism and, 127, 233; sunscreen and, 255; trustworthiness and, 2, 6, 174; truth and, 222, 249; vaccinations and, 218
- conservation of energy, 35, 38, 76, 138
- conservation of mass, 35, 180
- conservatives, 30, 130, 148, 155, 199, 263n91, 264n92
- constructivism, 175–76, 198–99, 202, 220, 262n70, 287n5
- contestation, 129, 246, 248
- continental drift, 5; bias and, 82; consensus and, 81; Daly and, 86; deduction and, 82–86; evidence and, 79, 81–82, 86–87; experience and, 82–83, 86; Gondwana and, 87; hypotheses and, 82–86; induction

- and, 250; plate tectonics and, 39, 69–70, 74, 81, 86, 173, 280n203; rejection of, 80–87; scientific method and, 82–86; scientific theories and, 83; Wegener and, 81–82, 86–87, 139, 146, 261n53; Willis and, 82–84
- contraction theory, 19
- Conway, Erik, 13, 18, 67, 130, 153, 224, 245–46, 292n44
- Cook, James, 62
- Cook, John, 218
- Copernican Revolution, The* (Kuhn), 39, 42
- co-production, 71, 267n3
- corpuscular theory, 35
- Cowan, Ruth Schwartz, 284n3
- Creation, 8, 16–17, 156, 158
- creationism, 16–17, 148, 158, 179, 182
- Creation Ministries International, 69
- Cree people, 62
- Crichton, Michael, 95, 99, 271n57
- critical interrogation, 58–60, 68, 137, 246, 266n136, 284n2
- critical positivity ratio, 234–35
- critical rationalism, 26–28, 259n31
- Cropsey, Joseph, 257n4
- Cruz, Ted, 293n3
- Daly, Reginald, 86
- Darwin, Charles, 31, 70, 79, 89–90, 167, 270n33, 274n97
- Davenport, Charles, 92–93, 133, 139, 272n71
- Dawkins, Richard, 70
- de Broglie, Louis, 33–34, 260n47
- decline effect, 203–4
- deduction: Bechtel and, 276n137; continental drift and, 82–86; eugenics and, 89, 95; hypothetico-deductive approach and, 82–83, 219; Kuhn and, 186–87; Limited Energy Theory and, 76, 79, 95, 135; observation and, 25; rival paradigms and, 186–87
- democracy, 6, 84, 99, 167–68, 203, 223, 282n23
- Democrats, 17, 71, 148, 203
- dental floss: American Dental Association and, 126; bias and, 120; cavities and, 119–20, 122, 126; Cochrane review on, 120–23, 126; confusion over, 15; consensus and, 128; ethics and, 124; evidence and, 6, 118–27, 154; experience and, 124–25; gingivitis and, 121–23, 126, 134; gum disease and, 119, 125; Iafolla and, 118; journals and, 119; media on, 118–21, 124, 126–27; patients and, 122–25; periodontal disease and, 123, 125–26; plaque and, 120, 122–23, 125, 277n162; public health officials and, 119; reliable knowledge and, 133–34; social consequences and, 18; trials on, 121–26
- depression: birth control and, 2, 5–6, 104–17, 140; experience and, 5–6, 104–7, 110, 112, 114; mood changes and, 107, 109, 112, 114; patients and, 104, 108–11, 114–15, 117; Prozac and, 114; psychiatrists and, 109–12; public health officials and, 117; serotonin and, 113–14, 134, 215; suicide and, 109–10, 113, 117, 275n121; Zolof and, 114
- dermatologists, 250–55
- Descartes, René, 29, 183
- Descent of Man, The* (Darwin), 89–90

- determinism, 102
- de Vries, Hugo, 92
- Dewey, John, 10, 197–99
- deWolf Smyth, Henry, 171–72, 285n13
- diabetes, 65
- Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 118–19
- diphtheria, 16
- disbelief, 26, 44
- disclosure, 66, 237, 243, 269n14, 272n66
- disinformation, 62, 67, 218, 240, 245, 268n13
- diversity: bias and, 249; biodiversity and, 8, 156, 158, 195, 223–25; Creation and, 8, 156, 158; demographic, 144, 263n90; epistemologies and, 4, 50–59, 145–46; evidence and, 143–44; experts and, 4, 7, 13, 132, 246; gender, 144; importance of, 249, 262n82, 264n100; intellectual, 263n90; objectivity and, 4; open discussion and, 145; perspectival, 144; physics and, 280n202; policy assessments and, 195, 200, 223–25; protecting Earth's, 157–58; reliable knowledge and, 132, 136–37; scientific communities and, 14; scientific method and, 143, 246, 250; scientific theories and, 7, 219; values and, 156–58
- Doctor's Case against the Pill, The* (Seaman), 109–10
- doctrine: empiricism and, 37; eugenics and, 100; positive knowledge and, 20; religious, 150; scientific method and, 20
- dogmatism, 36–37, 67, 84–86, 260n39
- Donn, Jeff, 119–21, 124
- Donne, John, 158
- Douglas, Heather, 145, 281n3, 283n28
- Duesberg, Peter H., 146, 280n205
- Duhem, Pierre: Duhem-Quine thesis, 37–39, 190; empiricism and, 4, 32–39, 48, 190, 260n40, 260n45, 260n47, 261n56, 261n58; experiments and, 34, 37, 260n45, 261n56, 261n58
- Earth Institute, 17
- Earth Summit, 148
- economic issues, 267n3; climate change and, 1, 12, 17–18, 63, 130, 145, 191–92, 218, 224–25; eugenics and, 90, 99–100; free market and, 1, 149; laissez-faire, 17–18, 225; policy assessments and, 191–93, 199; positive knowledge and, 263n87; reliable knowledge and, 130, 133; science and, 1, 12, 63, 130, 133, 145, 147–51, 173, 191–93, 204–7, 217, 224–25; values and, 147–51
- Edenhofer, Ottmar, 10, 12, 191–201, 223–28
- Edgerton, David, 178
- Edinburgh school, 44–49
- Einstein, Albert, 31, 53, 175, 218, 232–33, 260n47
- emphysema, 66
- empiricism: absolutism and, 46, 48; Ayer and, 24–25, 29, 236; challenges to, 26–39; co-production and, 71, 267n3; doctrine and, 37; Duhem and, 32–39, 48; evidence and, 32, 34, 37–38, 79, 81–82, 86, 140, 221, 230, 246, 264n100, 270n40; evolution and, 31, 71; experience and, 26, 30, 38; experiments and, 26, 33–39; experts and, 267n3; falsehoods and, 24–27, 37; Fleck and, 28–32, 39–41; hypotheses and, 26, 33–36; informed

- dissent and, 128; journals and, 32; logical, 24–26, 46, 259n26; objectivity and, 4; observation and, 24–27, 30, 32, 34; Popper and, 3, 26–29, 40, 42, 46–48; rationalism and, 26–28, 259n31, 284n4; religion and, 24, 30; scientific method and, 24–39, 79; skepticism and, 26, 28, 36–37, 259n31; truth and, 24, 32; under-determination and, 10, 32–39, 43, 190; varieties of, 24–26; verification and, 3, 24–27, 40
- energeticism, 270n26
- environmentalism: air pollution and, 194; American consumers and, 148; climate science and, 8, 18, 193; Earth Summit and, 148; eugenics and, 92, 94, 100, 102–3; extended evolutionary synthesis (EES) and, 60; extreme weather and, 1, 15, 140; global warming and, 1, 229–30, 293n3; greenhouse gases and, 1, 15, 65, 134, 230; Paris Agreement and, 287n3; petroleum industry and, 239; policy assessments and, 225; social costs of carbon (SCC) and, 191–92; values and, 8
- Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), 115, 191
- epistemologies: bias and, 51–59, 175, 178–79; collective activity and, 174; consensus and, 55, 58, 164, 174–75, 222–23; diversity and, 4, 50–59; ethics and, 145; everyday trust and, 9, 163–66, 177–79; evidence and, 49, 57, 59, 164, 178; evolution and, 167, 174–75, 180; experience and, 50–51, 169, 172–80; experiments and, 53, 174; experts and, 56–58, 171, 173, 177; hypotheses and, 55, 185; journals and, 58; Merton and, 43, 150–51, 155; moral issues and, 145, 164–71, 177; objectivity and, 50–54, 58–59; observation and, 52; philosophy and, 54–55, 164, 167, 171–72; Popper and, 29; reliable knowledge and, 165; scientific method and, 52, 55, 177; scientific theories and, 51, 55, 173, 179; situated knowledge and, 175–76; skepticism and, 56, 59, 74, 163, 173; social, 49–55; technology and, 9, 164–69, 175, 178–80, 215–21; truth and, 50, 165, 169, 175, 177, 179; vaccinations and, 170, 175, 179
- equality, 11, 98, 198
- estrogen, 113, 117, 125
- ethics: consensus and, 10, 228; dental floss and, 124; epistemologies and, 145; National Bioethics Advisory Commission and, 143; policy assessments and, 193, 196–200; religion and, 44, 158, 227; values and, 10, 44, 61, 124, 143, 145, 158, 193, 196–200, 227–28, 265n117, 287n5; weapons and, 166–70, 177, 179, 216
- eugenics: Bernal and, 97; bias and, 97; biometrics and, 92, 97; *Buck v. Bell* and, 78, 88, 272n75; consensus and, 95, 104, 142; Davenport and, 92–93, 133, 139, 272n71; deduction and, 89, 95; diversity and, 145–46; doctrine and, 100; economic issues and, 90, 99–100; environmentalism and, 92, 94, 100, 102–3; evidence and, 96, 99, 102–4; evolution and, 89–90, 92, 103; experience and, 96; experiments and, 92, 103; experts and, 88, 275n109;

- eugenics (continued)  
feeble-mindedness and, 87–88, 93, 272n75; feminism and, 273n78; Galton and, 89–91, 96, 98; Haldane and, 97–98, 138, 274n92; heredity and, 90, 92, 96–97, 100, 103; Hitler and, 88, 92; Holmes and, 88, 92; Huxley and, 97, 274n92, 274n97; immigration and, 89–97, 273n85; intelligence and, 90, 96–97, 100–101, 273n78; Jennings and, 102–4, 274n99; Jews and, 91, 96; journals and, 275n109; Lamarckian notions and, 92, 272n70; Laughlin and, 88–89, 93–94, 272n62; law of reversion to the mediocre and, 90–91; Limited Energy Theory and, 273n78; moral issues and, 61, 104; Muller and, 97–99, 138, 274n90, 274n92, 274n97; natalism and, 94–95; Nazis and, 5, 88, 91–94, 99; Pascal's Wager and, 140–41; people of color and, 91, 98; phenotypic traits and, 87; positive, 91; principal components of, 94–95; racism and, 88–100; Roosevelt and, 87–88, 91; scientific method and, 92, 102, 104; scientific theories and, 95; socialism and, 273n86; as social movement, 92; soft, 271n61; sterilization and, 61, 78, 88, 93–94, 98, 101, 138, 272n62, 272n75, 274n97; *Stump v. Sparkman* and, 272n75; truth and, 100; women and, 78, 88, 91, 93, 95, 100–101  
Eugenics Records Office (ERO), 88, 92–94, 102, 272n71  
everyday trust, 9, 163–66, 177–79  
evidence: bias and, 7, 20, 51–59, 73, 82, 97, 107–8, 120, 135, 144, 175, 178–79, 204–5, 207, 209, 232, 236–37, 240, 249, 263n89, 263n91, 284n4; and birth control's link to depression, 5–6, 109–10, 112, 115–17; climate change and, 6, 17, 63, 65, 140, 142, 145, 153–54, 192, 195, 217, 229–30, 235, 290n3; Comte and, 64; consensus and, 6, 13, 104, 127–28, 142, 233, 250, 293n3; continental drift and, 79, 81–82, 86–87; correlation and, 116–17; dental floss and, 6, 118–27, 154; dietary guidelines and, 118–19; discounting of, 104, 117, 133–34, 141, 153, 250, 263n88, 269n14; diversity and, 143–44; emotional contestation and, 248; empiricism and, 32, 34, 37–38, 79, 81–82, 86, 140, 221, 230, 246, 264n100, 270n40; epistemologies and, 49, 57, 59, 164, 178; eugenics and, 96, 99, 102–4; experts and, 6, 63, 65, 131, 142, 221, 246, 263n88, 267n3, 270n40; false, 7, 37, 46, 70, 115, 124, 142, 153; fraud and, 13, 231, 235–36, 240, 290n21, 291n37; historical, 18–19; hoaxes and, 119, 245, 291n37, 293n3, 293n55; induction and, 25–27, 34, 74, 82–84, 182, 185, 190; interpretation and, 30, 32, 86, 124, 128, 142, 186, 205, 248, 261n58; Krosnick and, 204, 209–10, 227–33, 236–38; objectivity and, 267n3; patient reports and, 275n113; peer review and, 3, 7, 9, 32, 53, 58, 66, 75, 130–31, 140, 145–46, 182, 221, 237, 240–41, 247, 252, 266n136, 293n55; pesticides and, 245; p-hacking and, 207, 229; policy assessments and, 192, 195, 226; Pope Francis and, 64; refutation and, 11, 13, 20, 27–28, 33, 36–40, 73, 117, 233, 258n13, 259n31,



- 259n33; reliable knowledge and, 128, 131, 133–36, 138, 233; replication issues and, 11–12, 205–8, 211, 228, 232, 236, 239, 242–43, 290n23; residual uncertainty and, 141–42; retractions and, 12–13, 203, 206, 228, 233–37, 247, 289n14, 291n37, 292n43; science in action and, 217; science studies and, 44–46, 49; scientific method and, 6–7, 34, 37, 49, 79, 82, 86, 117, 127, 133–34, 143, 211, 246, 250; statistics and, 12, 73–74, 102, 114–16, 122, 133–34, 209, 211, 229–30, 268n13, 275n116; sunscreen and, 13, 245, 250–55, 294n11, 294n13; tobacco industry and, 65–66, 290n26; vaccinations and, 275n114; values and, 6, 8, 65, 121, 127–28, 145, 153–54, 192, 211; vetted, 57, 63–64, 66, 69–70, 232
- evolution, 222; Big Bang theory and, 190; Darwin and, 31, 70, 79, 89–90, 167, 270n33, 274n97; Dawkins and, 70; empiricism and, 31, 71; epistemologies and, 167, 174–75, 180; eugenics and, 89–90, 92, 103; extended evolutionary synthesis (EES) and, 60, 146; Gallup Poll on, 190; Gould and, 91, 215; human dignity and, 8; Huxley and, 97, 274n97; Kuhn and, 10, 39–41; meaning of life and, 149; moral issues and, 8, 148–49, 167, 215; natural selection and, 16, 89; Pascal's Wager and, 197; present and future of science and, 206; reliable knowledge and, 6, 129, 206; religion and, 70, 149, 155, 167, 197, 217–18; Station for Experimental Evolution and, 92, 272n71; survival of fittest and, 78, 89; traditionalists and, 59; values and, 148–49
- experience, 265n117, 266n130; brain functions and, 205; Comte and, 64; cumulative, 198; dental floss and, 124–25; depression and, 5–6, 104–7, 110, 112, 114; empiricism and, 26, 30, 38; epistemologies and, 50–51, 169, 172–80; eugenics and, 96; experts and, 131–32, 173, 278n183; James and, 72; observation and, 26, 40, 64, 72, 125, 134, 178, 246; policy assessments and, 198; present and future of science and, 204, 206; reason and, 182; reliable knowledge and, 131–34; science studies and, 40; skepticism and, 183; verification through, 26
- experiments: canceled errors and, 220; Comte and, 64; confirmation and, 33–35, 103, 219, 233; controlled, 291n41; Duhem and, 34, 37, 260n45, 261n56, 261n58; empiricism and, 26, 33–39; ensuring desired results of, 11; epistemologies and, 53, 174; eugenics and, 92, 103; fabricated data and, 11; Harvard Case Studies in Experimental Science and, 39; incremental learning and, 10; industry influence and, 291n41; laws and, 34, 260n45; Limited Energy Theory and, 80; observation and, 26, 34, 64, 187, 234, 261n58; policy assessments and, 198; replication of, 11–12, 205–8, 211, 228, 232, 236, 239, 242–43, 290n23; speed of light and, 34; Stanford prison, 204, 231–32, 290n23; Station for Experimental Evolution and, 272n71; use of technology and, 219

- experts, 272n62; blanket trust and, 255;  
climate change and, 1; community  
of, 4, 7, 13, 58, 60–61, 128, 130,  
142–43, 173, 243, 259n33, 260n39,  
266n136, 267n3, 275n109; conflict  
of interest and, 65; consensus and,  
4, 6–7, 12–13, 129, 141–43, 149, 192,  
222–23, 234, 249, 275n109; corrupt  
practices and, 243; credentials and,  
131–32, 221–22, 247; democracy and,  
6; diversity and, 4, 7, 13, 132, 246;  
empiricism and, 267n3; endorse-  
ments and, 182; epistemologies and,  
56–58, 171, 173, 177; eugenics and, 88,  
275n109; evidence and, 6, 63, 65,  
131, 142, 221, 246, 263n88, 267n3,  
270n40; exclusive domains of,  
60–61; experience and, 131–32,  
173, 278n183; indigenous, 61–62,  
265n124; informed trust and, 60–61;  
knowledge traditions and, 63; lay  
people and, 61–62, 132, 223, 267n3,  
279n192; objectivity and, 4; Pascal’s  
Wager and, 141–43; peer review  
and, 7, 9, 182, 221, 247, 266n136;  
policy assessments and, 192–96,  
200, 224; and present and future  
of science, 202; reaching outside  
domain of, 4, 60–61, 131, 222,  
263n88, 278n183; reliable knowledge  
and, 128–32; reproduction of  
authority and, 278n179; social  
authority and, 71; society’s need for,  
247; statistical clusters and, 281n14;  
values and, 149; vicious circularity  
of, 9, 12, 182, 221–22
- extended evolutionary synthesis  
(EES), 60, 146, 265n13
- extrasensory perception (ESP), 203, 231
- Fabri, Honoré, 187–89
- Facing Up* (Weinberg), 269n19
- facsimile science, 240–41, 292n49
- faith, 36, 56, 66, 68, 168, 178, 183
- fake news, 245
- fallibilism, 3
- falsehoods: alternative facts and, 245;  
birth control data and, 115, 140;  
circularity and, 9, 181–82, 185,  
221–22; critical positivity ratio and,  
234–35; disinformation and, 62, 67,  
218, 240, 245, 268n13; empiricism  
and, 24–27, 37; evidence and, 7, 37,  
46, 70, 115, 124, 142, 153; fake news  
and, 245; fraud and, 13, 231, 235–36,  
240, 290n21, 291n37; Ioannidis  
paper on, 207; James and, 72;  
journals and, 204–6, 293n55;  
misinformation and, 1, 65–67,  
129, 142, 281n3, 289n7, 290n26;  
observation and, 24, 27; Pascal’s  
Wager and, 142; p-hacking and, 207,  
229; and present and future of  
science, 207, 209–10; rejection of,  
181; replication issues and, 11–13,  
205–8, 211, 228, 232, 236, 239, 289n17,  
290n23; retractions and, 12–13, 203,  
206, 228–29, 233–37, 247, 291n37,  
292n43; science studies and, 44–47;  
values and, 152–53, 156–58, 282n23
- falsifiability, 3, 26
- Fang, Ferric C., 235
- fascism, 167–68
- Fausto-Sterling, Anne, 263n89
- feeble-mindedness, 87–88, 93, 272n75
- feminism: birth control and, 109;  
epistemologies and, 49–51, 54–55,  
175–76; eugenics and, 273n78;  
Haraway and, 175, 263n89; Harding

- and, 50–54, 144, 263n89, 263n91, 264n92; inclusion and, 14, 51, 59; Limited Energy Theory and, 5, 7, 76–80, 89, 95, 128, 136, 249, 264n97, 270n40, 273n78; Longino and, 4, 31, 50–55, 57, 247, 259n33, 263n89, 264n100; objectivity and, 175–76; ontological relativism and, 263n89; philosophy and, 4, 31, 50–54–55, 57, 144, 247, 259n33, 263n89, 263n91, 264n92, 264n100; rational science and, 279n192; reliable knowledge and, 136; social epistemology and, 49–51, 54–55
- fertility, 5, 76–77, 135
- Festinger, Leon, 204
- fetishism, 6–7, 134, 139, 250
- Feyerabend, Paul, 46–48, 51
- First Immune, 243
- Fleck, Ludwik, 3, 28–32, 39–41, 260n39, 261n69
- fluoridation, 70
- food, 66, 73, 121, 180, 195, 219, 251, 274n97
- fossil fuels. *See* petroleum industry
- Foucault, Léon, 34–35
- Framatone, 241
- fraud, 13, 231, 235–36, 240, 290n21, 291n37
- free market, 1, 149
- Friedman, Harris, 234
- funding, 106; competition for, 280n205, 292n46; extended evolutionary synthesis (EES) and, 60; full disclosure of, 243, 269n14; government, 168, 173, 282n23; industry, 13, 66, 73, 213, 239, 266n133, 292n44; present and future of science and, 202, 208, 210; publication rates and, 240
- Galileo, 10, 31, 187–89, 223, 286n12
- Galton, Francis, 89–91, 96, 98
- Garber, Marjorie, 131
- GcMAF, 243
- Genesis, Bible book of, 158
- Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact, The* (Fleck), 29
- Geneticists' Manifesto* (Muller), 98–100, 146
- genetics, 99, 165, 180, 206
- Gibbs, J. Willard, 260n40
- Gilbert, Scott, 263n89
- gingivitis, 121–23, 126, 134
- global warming, 1, 229–30, 293n3
- God: Creation and, 8, 16–17, 156, 158; creationism and, 16–17, 148, 158; deepening appreciation for, 152; end times and, 282n26; existence of, 197; glory of, 158; materialism and, 167; moral issues and, 167; Pascal's Wager and, 197; Pope Francis and, 64; Pope Pius XI and, 273n78; theology and, 20–21, 70, 150, 228, 287n6; values and, 148, 152, 156, 158
- Goethe, 258n12
- Gondwana, 87
- Goonatilake, Susantha, 62
- Gould, Stephen Jay, 91, 215
- Grant, Madison, 91–92
- Great Barrier Reef, 155–56
- greenhouse gases, 1, 15, 65, 134, 230
- Gross, Paul, 51, 54, 263n91
- Group on Best Practices in Science (BPS), 202, 206
- Guerlac, Henry, 169
- gum disease, 119, 125
- Guterres, António, 17
- gynecologists, 111, 128, 250

- Haber, Fritz, 166  
Haldane, J.B.S., 97–98, 138, 274n92  
Hall, G. Stanley, 80  
Haraway, Donna, 175, 263n89  
Hardie, Jeremy, 126  
Harding, Sandra, 50–54, 144, 263n89, 263n91, 264n92  
Harvard Case Histories in Experimental Science, 39  
Haydn, Joseph, 158  
heart disease, 65, 123, 250–51  
*Hedgehog Review*, 129  
Heilbron, John, 151  
Hempel, Carl, 25  
*Hereditary Genius* (Galton), 90  
heredity, 90, 92, 94, 96–98, 100, 103, 218  
*Higher Superstitions: The Academic Left and Its Quarrels with Science* (Gross and Levitt), 54, 263n91  
Hill, Austin Bradford, 234  
History of Science Society, 169  
Hitler, Adolf, 88, 92  
HIV-AIDS, 64, 71, 146, 266n130, 275n113  
hoaxes, 119, 245, 291n37, 293n3, 293n55  
Hofstadter, Richard, 86, 165  
holism, 35, 38  
Holmes, Oliver Wendell, Jr., 88, 92  
Holmes, Oliver Wendell, Sr., 78  
honor societies, 19  
House Committee on Un-American Activities, 171  
Hubbard, Ruth, 263n89  
Hujoel, Philippe, 123  
Hume, David, 22, 25, 182  
humility, 6–7, 36, 127, 138–39  
Huxley, Julian, 97, 274n92, 274n97  
hypotheses, 280n205; AIDS and, 146; birth control and, 116; continental drift and, 82–86; empiricism and, 26, 33–36; epistemologies and, 55, 185; induction and, 182–83; null, 115–16, 211; observation and, 25, 83, 86; policy assessments and, 195–99; science studies and, 46; tests and, 25, 33–35, 84, 203, 253  
Iafolla, Tim, 118  
ICBMs, 169  
immigrants, 89–97, 273n85  
incommensurability, 10, 40–41, 43, 186, 190  
indigenous experts, 61–62, 265n124  
induction: continental drift and, 250; Hume and, 25, 182; hypotheses and, 182–83; observation and, 25–27, 34, 83, 185; philosophy and, 25–27, 34, 74, 82–84, 182, 185, 190  
industry funding, 13, 66, 73, 208, 210, 239, 266n133, 292n44  
informed trust, 4, 60  
Inglis, Bob, 155–56  
Inhofe, James, 293n3  
intelligence, 90, 96–97, 100–101, 273n78  
Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), 17, 59, 194, 225–26, 287n3  
*Investigation vs. Propagandism* (Chamberlin), 85  
Ioannidis, John, 207  
IQ tests, 96–97  
Jacobi, Mary Putnam, 5, 79–80, 136, 249  
James, William, 72  
Jasanoff, Sheila, 70, 267n3  
Jennings, Herbert Spencer, 102–4, 274n99

- Jews, 91, 96, 156–57
- Johnson-Read Immigration Restriction Act, 91
- journals: bad research and, 11, 240–41; bias and, 209, 235, 263n91; conservative, 263n91; dental floss and, 119; empiricism and, 32; English-language, 240; epistemologies and, 58; ESP and, 203; eugenics and, 275n109; everyday trust and, 169; experts and, 220–21, 247, 266n136; extended evolutionary synthesis (EES) and, 60; fake academia and, 243; false papers in, 203–7, 234, 237, 293n55; for-profit, 240; peer review and, 3, 7, 9, 32, 53, 58, 66, 75, 130–31, 140, 145–46, 182, 221, 237, 240–41, 247, 252, 266n136, 293n55; reliable knowledge and, 131–33, 136; replication issues and, 204–7, 228, 242–43, 290n23; retractions and, 203, 206, 228, 235, 237–38, 247, 291n37, 292n43; system values and, 209
- Jussim, Lee, 202
- Kahneman, Daniel, 203
- Keller, Evelyn Fox, 263n89
- Kevles, Daniel, 94, 273n80, 273n85
- Knorr-Cetina, Karin, 45
- Korean War, 170
- Kowarsch, Martin, 10–12, 191–201, 223–28
- Kranzberg, Melvin, 169
- Krosnick, Jon, 73, 134; evidence and, 204, 209–10, 227–33, 236–38; Group on Best Practices in Science (BPS) and, 202, 206; Oreskes and, 202, 211, 228–44, 267n106; and present and future of science, 202–11; psychology and, 11, 203–5, 208, 232–34; replication crisis and, 12, 204–7, 226, 230, 234, 237, 242–43; scientific method and, 11, 202, 204, 209–10
- Kuhn, Thomas, 4, 10, 32, 39–43, 141, 186–87, 261n65, 261n66, 261n69
- Lakatos, Imre, 41, 46
- Lamarckianism, 92, 272n70
- Lange, Marc, 9–12, 181–90, 221–23
- Language, Truth and Logic* (Ayer), 25
- Latour, Bruno, 23, 45, 48–49, 70–71, 247, 259n24, 268n7
- Laudan, Larry, 74, 269n17
- Laughlin, Harry, 88–89, 93–94, 272n62
- law of reversion to the mediocre, 90–91
- lay people, 61–62, 132, 223, 267n3, 279n192
- Le Cazre, Pierre, 187–89
- Lehrer, Jonah, 203–4
- Levitt, Norman, 51, 54, 263n91
- liberals, 145, 199, 223, 259n31, 263n91
- Libertarians, 130, 142, 153, 155
- liberty, 11, 198, 223, 283n30
- Limbaugh, Rush, 282n23
- Limited Energy Theory: bias and, 249; consensus and, 128; deduction and, 76, 79, 95, 135; eugenics and, 273n78; experiments and, 80; higher education for women and, 76–80, 135, 138, 226, 270n40; Jacobi and, 5, 79–80, 136, 249; moral issues and, 79; Pascal's Wager and, 140–41; religion and, 79; truth and, 79; values and, 136; women and, 5, 7, 76–80, 89, 95, 128, 136, 249, 264n97, 270n40, 273n78

- Lincoln, Abraham, 19  
Lindee, Susan, 9, 163–80, 215–21  
Longino, Helen, 4, 31, 50–55, 57, 247,  
259n33, 263n89, 264n100  
Longwell, Chester, 81  
Luckman, Thomas, 262n70  
Luria, Salvador, 172  
Lyell, Charles, 85
- Macedo, Stephen, 1–14  
Malthus, Thomas, 89, 94  
Mansfield, Harvey C., 257n4  
“Many Psychology Findings Not as  
Strong as Claimed, Study Says”  
(*New York Times*), 205  
Markowitz, Gerald, 67  
Marxism, 20, 28–29  
McCain, John R., 111–12  
McCarthy, Joseph, 171  
Mead, Margaret, 97  
measles, 16  
Mendel, Gregor, 92  
menstruation, 78–80  
Mercator Research Institute on  
Global Commons and Climate  
Change, 10  
*Merchants of Doubt* (Oreskes and  
Conway), 13, 130, 153, 224, 245–46,  
292n44  
Merton, Robert, 43, 150–51, 155  
metaphysics, 20–22  
military, 170–73, 179, 216  
Millennium Development Goals, 17  
Miller, Art, 204–5  
Miller, Ken, 148  
misinformation, 1, 65–67, 129, 142,  
281n3, 289n7, 290n26  
MIT, 172  
mood changes, 107, 109, 112, 114  
moral issues: designing bombs and, 9;  
diversity and, 264n100; epistemolo-  
gies and, 145, 164–71, 177; eugenics  
and, 61, 104; evolution and, 8,  
148–49, 167, 215; God and, 167;  
Limited Energy Theory and, 79;  
normative questions and, 63; policy  
assessments and, 226, 287n5;  
positive knowledge and, 21; public  
policy and, 147–49; purity and, 9, 11,  
150, 168, 198, 215, 284n10; reliable  
knowledge and, 130, 139; religion  
and, 7, 21, 79, 157, 167, 215; scientific  
imperatives and, 279n192; weapons  
and, 166–70, 177, 179, 216  
Morgan, T. H., 104  
Mormons, 157  
“Most Psychology Findings Cannot  
Be Replicated” (*New York Times*), 205  
Muller, Hermann, 97–99, 138, 274n90,  
274n92, 274n97  
mumps, 16  
Murray, Thomas E., 285n13
- NASA, 69  
natalism, 94–95  
National Bioethics Advisory  
Commission, 143  
National Institutes of Health, 118  
nationalism, 11, 168, 176, 198  
National Science Foundation, 208  
natural selection, 16, 89  
*Nature* journal, 205, 242  
nature/nurture debates, 95–96, 103  
Nazis, 5, 88, 91–94, 99  
Needham, Joseph, 98  
Neptunist school, 83  
Nestle, Miriam, 67  
Neumann, John von, 60–61

- Neurath, Otto, 25
- Newton, Isaac, 31–32, 35, 51, 73, 168–69, 232, 264n92
- New York Times*, 118–21, 126, 132, 203, 205, 243
- Noakes, David, 243
- Nobel Prize, 67, 98, 104, 166, 174, 203, 263n88, 269n19
- Nordic race, 91, 97
- Nosek, Brian, 205
- nuclear energy, 60–61, 165, 169, 177, 195, 215, 241, 279n192
- null results, 115–16, 211
- nutrition, 67, 73, 80, 96, 119, 124, 134, 138, 268n13, 277n152
- Obama, Barack, 191–92
- obesity, 65
- objectivity: conventional notions of, 6; diversity and, 4; Edinburgh school and, 46; epistemologies and, 50–54, 58–59; experts and, 4; feminism and, 175–76; impartiality and, 263n91; Merton on, 150–51; policy assessments and, 192, 196–97; Popper and, 259n33; questioning, 150; as regulative ideal, 267n3; reliable knowledge and, 132; science studies and, 46–47; scientific writing styles and, 154; Tyson and, 263n91
- observation: accuracy and, 184, 186; confirmation and, 184; continental drift and, 82–83, 86; deduction and, 25; empiricism and, 24–27, 30, 32, 34; epistemologies and, 52; experience and, 26, 40, 64, 72, 125, 134, 178, 246; experiments and, 26, 34, 64, 187, 234, 261n58; falsehoods and, 24, 27; as first stage of research, 183; Galileo and, 187–89; generalizations and, 27, 185; hypotheses and, 25, 83, 86; incomplete nature of, 234; induction and, 25–27, 34, 83, 185; interpretation and, 30, 32, 86, 186, 248, 261n58; logical order of, 183–85; philosophy and, 3; positive knowledge and, 21–23; and present and future of science, 202, 204, 209; qualified, 184; science studies and, 40, 46, 48; scientific reasoning and, 21; scientific theories and, 22–27, 34, 64, 82, 86, 96, 184, 186–87, 261n58; skepticism and, 26, 183–84; speculation and, 1, 213, 235–36; theory-ladenness of, 261n58; truth and, 19, 21, 24, 74; verification and, 3, 24–27, 40
- oceanography, 151, 216, 266n136
- opioid abuse, 123
- Oppenheimer, J. Robert, 171–72
- Oreskes, Naomi: Edenhofer and, 192–200, 223–28; Kowarsch and, 192–200, 223–28; Krosnick and, 202, 211, 228–44, 265n106; Lange and, 181–86, 221–23; Lindee and, 173–74, 177–79, 215–21; Macedo and, 2–13; *Merchants of Doubt* and, 13, 130, 153, 224, 245–46, 292n44
- Origin of Continents and Oceans* (Wegener), 82–83
- Origin of Species* (Darwin), 31
- Outside* magazine, 250–55
- Oxford Eugenics Society, 97
- oxybenzone, 250, 294n10, 294n13
- Papal Encyclical on Climate Change, 228
- Paris Agreement, 287n3

- Pascal, Blaise, 36
- Pascal's Wager: birth control and, 104–17; eugenics and, 140–41; existence of God and, 197; experts and, 141–43; falsehoods and, 142; Kuhn and, 141; Limited Energy Theory and, 140–41; policy assessments and, 193–97; stakes of error and, 7
- Passing of the Great Race, The* (Grant), 91–92
- patients: AIDS crisis and, 275n113; birth control and, 104, 108–11, 114–15, 117, 250; dental floss and, 122–25; depression and, 104, 108–11, 114–15, 117; eugenics and, 88, 275n113; information of, 6, 61, 122, 130–31, 135; self-reporting and, 108, 130, 275n113
- Pauling, Linus, 174, 284n1
- Pearson, Karl, 102
- peer review: consensus and, 130–31; empiricism and, 32; epistemologies and, 53, 58; experts and, 7, 9, 182, 221, 247, 266n136; journals and, 3, 7, 9, 32, 53, 58, 66, 75, 130–31, 140, 145–46, 182, 221, 237, 240–41, 247, 252, 266n136, 293n55; reliable knowledge and, 130–31; revisions and, 247
- Pence, Mike, 16
- people of color, 51, 53, 61, 91, 98, 273n85
- performances, 71, 268n5, 268n7
- periodontal disease, 123, 125–26
- pertussis, 16
- pesticides, 66, 224, 239, 245
- petroleum industry: air pollution and, 194; climate change and, 4, 17–18, 63, 65, 67, 142, 225; environmentalism and, 239; greenhouse gases and, 65; misinformation and, 1, 67; paid studies and, 210, 213, 240–41; political pressure by, 17; reliable knowledge and, 129–30; Trump and, 194; truth and, 4
- p-hacking, 207, 229
- philosophy: absolutism and, 46, 48; Bacon and, 22, 33; Comte and, 20–25, 29, 42, 48, 64, 182, 259n25; Descartes and, 29, 183; Dewey and, 10, 197–99; Douglas and, 145; Duhem and, 4, 32–39, 48, 190, 260n40, 260n47, 261n58; epistemologies and, 54–55, 164, 167, 171–72; feminist, 4, 31, 49–57, 79, 109, 136, 144, 175–76, 247, 259n33, 263n89, 263n91, 264n92, 264n100, 273n78, 279n192; Feyerabend and, 46–48, 51; Harding and, 50–54, 144, 263n89, 263n91, 264n92; Hume and, 22, 25, 182; incommensurability and, 10, 40–41, 43, 186, 190; induction and, 25–27, 34, 74, 82–84, 182, 184–85, 190; Kuhn and, 4, 10, 32, 39–43, 141, 186–87, 261n65, 261n66, 261n69; Lange and, 9; Latour and, 23, 45, 48–49, 70–71, 247, 259n24, 268n7; limitations of, 255; Longino and, 4, 31, 50–55, 57, 247, 259n33, 263n89, 264n100; Marx and, 20, 28–29; nature of understanding and, 2–3; observation and, 3; Popper and, 3, 26–29, 40, 42, 46–48, 72, 259n31, 259n33; and present and future of science, 202; Quine and, 4, 25, 32, 37–39, 41, 43, 190, 261n58; relativism and, 41, 46, 52, 263n89, 287n5; science studies and, 19; scientific method and, 2–3, 29, 46, 55, 197, 211, 276n137; teleology and, 20–21, 23; use of mechanism and, 276n137



- plaque, 120, 122–23, 125, 277n162
- plate tectonics, 39, 69–70, 74, 81, 86, 173, 280n203
- Plato, 249
- PLOS One* journal, 207
- polar vortex, 1
- policy assessments: consensus and, 10, 192; creating uncertainty and, 132–33; Dewey and, 197–99; diversity and, 195, 200, 223–24; economic issues and, 191–93, 199; environmentalism and, 225; ethics and, 193, 196–200; EU studies and, 195; evidence and, 192, 195, 226; experience and, 198; experiments and, 198; experts and, 192–96, 200, 224; hypotheses and, 195–99; ineffective decisions on, 196; objectivity and, 192, 196–97; Pascal's Wager and, 193–97; scientific method and, 197; skepticism and, 192–93, 287n5; social costs of carbon (SCC) and, 191–92; technology and, 193, 195; Trump and, 191–92, 194; values and, 147, 192–93, 196–201
- Pollard, Ernest, 170–72, 285n13
- Polynesians, 62
- Pope Francis, 64, 157–58, 228
- Pope Pius XI, 273n78
- Popper, Karl, 3, 26–29, 40, 42, 46–48, 72, 244, 259n31, 259n33
- positive knowledge: Comte and, 20–23; doctrine and, 20; economic issues and, 263n87; honor societies and, 19; moral issues and, 21; observation and, 21–23; religion and, 20–23; scientific method and, 20; truth and, 21, 249
- positivism, 20–30, 46, 259n24, 259n26
- Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, 10
- Poynter.org, 119
- pragmatism, 10, 197–98
- Princeton University, 171–72, 222
- Principia Mathematica* (Newton), 31, 51, 264n92
- Probst, Ronald F., 172
- Proctor, Robert, 67
- progesterin, 113
- Prothero, Stephen, 156–57
- Prozac, 114
- psychiatrists, 109–12, 128
- psychologists, 112, 128, 177, 180, 203–5, 208, 232–34, 289n17
- Ptolemaic system, 19, 72
- PubMed, 112, 235
- Puritans, 151
- purity, 9, 11, 150, 168, 198, 215, 284n10
- quantum mechanics, 30, 41
- Question of Rest for Women during Menstruation, The* (Jacobi), 79–80
- Quine, Willard Van Orman, 4, 25, 32, 37–39, 41, 43, 190, 261n58
- racism: eugenics and, 88–100; immigrants and, 89–97, 273n85; Nazis and, 5, 88, 91–94, 99; Nordic race and, 91, 97; people of color and, 51, 53, 61, 91, 98, 273n85; racial degeneration and, 88, 91, 97; sterilization and, 61, 78, 88, 93–94, 98, 101, 138, 272n62, 272n75, 274n97
- randomized trials, 6, 120, 123–24, 126, 134, 278n166
- rationalism, 26–28, 259n31, 284n4
- refutation, 11, 13, 20, 27–28, 33, 36–40, 73, 117, 233, 258n13, 259n31, 259n33

- Reid, Harry Fielding, 82–83
- relativism, 41, 46, 52, 263n89, 287n5
- relativity, 28, 39, 218, 232–33
- reliable knowledge: bias and, 135;  
collective activity and, 139; consensus and, 127–33; diversity and, 132, 136–37; economic issues and, 130, 133; epistemologies and, 165; evidence and, 128, 131, 133–36, 138, 233; evolution and, 6, 129; experience and, 131–34; experts and, 128–32; fraud and, 13, 231, 235–36, 240, 290n21, 291n37; humility and, 138–39; informed dissent and, 128; journals and, 131–33, 136; moral issues and, 130, 139; objectivity and, 132; petroleum industry and, 129–30; scientific method and, 127, 133–35, 139; scientific theories and, 135–37; skepticism and, 127, 139; truth and, 131, 137, 139; vaccinations and, 129, 219; values and, 136–38
- religion: Bible and, 148, 158, 282n26; Catholicism and, 64, 148, 151, 156–58, 228, 273n78, 287n5; Christians and, 8, 21, 129, 148–49, 153, 155, 157, 228, 273n78, 282n26; climate science and, 149, 155–58, 217–18, 227–28; Comte and, 20; consensus and, 228; Creation and, 8, 16–17, 156, 158; creationism and, 16–17, 158, 179, 182; diversity from, 14; doctrine and, 150; empiricism and, 24, 30; end times and, 282n26; ethics and, 44, 158, 227; evolution and, 70, 149, 155, 167, 197, 217–18; God and, 16–17, 64, 148, 152, 156, 158, 167, 197, 273n78, 282n26; Jews and, 91, 96, 156–57; Limited Energy Theory and, 79; moral issues and, 7, 21, 79, 157, 167, 215; Mormons and, 157; Pascal's Wager and, 197; Pence and, 16; positive knowledge and, 20–23; Protestants and, 156; Puritans and, 151; Republicans and, 16–17; science and, 2, 7, 14, 16, 20–21, 24, 30, 44, 70, 74, 79, 147–50, 155, 158, 167, 197, 215, 217, 227–28, 258n12, 267n3; science studies and, 44; Ten Commandments and, 156–57; theology and, 20–21, 70, 150, 228, 287n6; vaccinations and, 63; values and, 2, 7, 147–50, 155–58, 167, 258n12
- replication issues, 11–12, 204–7, 226, 230, 234, 237, 240–41, 289n13, 289n17, 290n23
- Republicans, 293n3; broken government and, 203; education and, 72; religion and, 16–17; values and, 148–49, 153, 155
- retractions, 12–13, 203, 206, 228–29, 233–38, 247, 289n14, 291n37, 292n43
- RetractionWatch.com, 206, 236
- revisions, 32, 36, 38, 199–200, 247
- Roberts, Dorothy E., 271n41
- Robeson, Paul, 98
- Robinson, Art, 174, 284n1
- robustness, 27, 53, 57, 133, 168
- Roosevelt, Teddy, 87–88, 91
- Rosner, David, 67
- Rudwick, Martin, 247
- Russell, Bertrand, 259n30
- Sachs, Jeffrey, 17
- Sagan, Carl, 179
- Santorium, Rick, 8, 148–49
- Save-the-Redwoods League, 91
- Schaffer, Simon, 44

- Schlick, Moritz, 30
- Schooler, Jonathan, 203–4
- Schuchert, Charles, 87
- science, 16–17; bias and, 7, 20, 51–59, 73, 82, 97, 107–8, 120, 135, 144, 175, 178–79, 205, 209, 211, 232, 236–37, 240, 249, 263n89, 263n91, 284n4; as collective activity, 2–3, 28–32, 39, 50, 52, 58, 68, 139, 174, 203, 246–48, 260n39; as consensual, 3, 19, 55, 60, 149; conservation laws of, 35, 38, 76, 138, 180; Creation and, 8, 156, 158; facsimile, 240–41, 292n49; failed theories of, 19, 60–61, 72, 203–6, 234–35; fraud and, 13, 231, 235–36, 240, 290n21, 291n37; God and, 16; Group on Best Practices in Science (BPS) and, 202, 206; hoaxes and, 119, 245, 291n37, 293n3, 293n55; incommensurability and, 10, 40–41, 43, 186, 190; metaphysics and, 20–22; Nobel Prize and, 67, 98, 104, 166, 174, 204, 263n88, 269n19; political debate masquerading as, 129; present and future of, 202–11; pure, 9, 150–51, 166, 168–69, 172, 177, 216; replication crisis and, 12–13, 228, 289n13; Sagan on, 179; as search for new knowledge, 170; technology and, 9, 152, 164, 166–69, 175, 178–80, 193, 213, 215–21, 284n2, 287n5
- Science, the Endless Frontier* (Bush), 167–68
- Science and Human Values* (Bronowski), 167
- Science* journal, 205, 242
- Science Question in Feminism, The* (Harding), 50–51
- science studies: absolutism and, 46, 48; diversity and, 47–48; Edinburgh school and, 44–49; evidence and, 44–46, 49; experience and, 40; failed theories of science and, 19, 72, 234–35; falsehoods and, 44–47; hypotheses and, 46; Kuhn and, 39–43; observation and, 40, 46, 48; p-hacking and, 207, 229; philosophy and, 19; relativism and, 41, 46, 52, 263n89, 287n5; religion and, 44; replication issues and, 11–12, 205–8, 211, 228, 232, 236, 239, 242–43, 290n23; rise of, 43–49; scientific method and, 39–49; scientific theories and, 41; social construction and, 43–50, 220, 262n70, 262n76; social turn in, 4, 54, 57; sociology of scientific knowledge and, 43–49; truth and, 4–5, 46–49
- scientific method: birth control and, 107–8, 113–14, 117; Comte and, 20–23, 42, 48; consensus and, 2, 6, 55, 127, 149, 249–50; continental drift and, 82–86; deduction and, 25, 76, 79, 82–84, 86, 89, 95, 135, 186–87, 219, 276n137; diversity and, 143, 246, 250; doctrine and, 20; empiricism and, 24–39, 79; epistemologies and, 52, 55, 177; eugenics and, 92, 102, 104; European, 5; evidence and, 6–7, 34, 37, 49, 79, 82, 86, 117, 127, 133–34, 143, 211, 246, 250; experiments and, 26 (*see also* experiments); fetishism and, 6–7, 134, 139, 250; general lessons on, 6; hypotheses and, 26 (*see also* hypotheses); induction and, 25–27, 34, 74, 82–84, 182, 185, 190; Krosnick and, 11; Kuhn and, 10, 39,

- scientific method (continued)  
41–42, 186; limitations of, 68, 181, 246; naturalism and, 240, 276n137; objectivity and, 46–47 (*see also* objectivity); observation and, 3 (*see also* observation); openness and, 249; p-hacking and, 207, 229; philosophy and, 2–3, 29, 46, 55, 197, 211, 276n137; policy assessments and, 197; positive knowledge and, 20; and present and future of science, 202, 204, 209–10; refutation and, 11, 13, 20, 27–28, 33, 36–40, 73, 117, 233, 258n13, 259n31, 259n33; reliable knowledge and, 127, 133–35, 139; science studies and, 39–49; scientific theories and, 3, 186; self-reporting and, 107–8, 113; stages of, 183–84; under-determination and, 10, 32–39, 43, 190; values and, 149; verification and, 3, 24–27, 40
- scientific theories: Bacon and, 22; Comte and, 22–23; continental drift and, 83; critical positivity ratio and, 234–35; defending, 83, 220; development of, 83; diversity and, 7, 219; epistemologies and, 51, 55, 173, 179; eugenics and, 95; failed, 19, 60–61, 72, 203–6, 234–35; peer review and, 3, 7, 9, 32, 53, 58, 66, 75, 130–31, 140, 145–46, 182, 221, 237, 240–41, 247, 252, 266n136, 293n55; refutation and, 11, 13, 20, 27–28, 33, 36–40, 73, 117, 233, 258n13, 259n31, 259n33; reliable knowledge and, 135–37; religion and, 70; replication crisis and, 12–13, 208, 211, 228, 236, 239, 289n17, 290n23; retail challenges and, 186; retractions and, 12–13, 203, 206, 228–29, 233–37, 247, 289n14, 291n37, 292n43; revisions and, 32, 36, 38, 199–200, 247; scientific method and, 3, 186; wholesale challenges and, 186
- Scott, Colin, 62
- Seaman, Barbara, 109–11, 136
- Seismological Society of America, 82
- Sellars, Wilfrid, 185
- Seralini, Gilles, 292n43
- serotonin, 113–14, 134, 215
- Sex in Education; or, a Fair Chance for Girls* (Clarke), 76–78, 270n33, 270n40
- sexism, 51, 136
- Sextus Empiricus, 183
- Shapin, Steven, 44, 167, 178
- Shelley, Mary, 258n12
- Shenton, Joan, 266n130
- Shockley, William, 60–61
- Shock of the Old, The* (Edgerton), 178
- Showalter, Elaine, 76
- Showalter, English, 76
- Singewald, Joseph, 82
- skepticism: American Enterprise Institute (AEI) and, 17; attacking scientists and, 67–68, 255; climate change and, 4, 8, 12, 17, 73, 140, 148, 153, 192–93, 266n130, 283n29, 284n1; consensus and, 127, 233; disbelief and, 26, 44; dizziness and, 183–84; empiricism and, 26, 28, 36–37, 259n31; epistemologies and, 56, 59, 74, 163, 173; everyday trust and, 9; observation and, 26, 184; organizational agendas and, 4–5, 67; policy assessments and, 192–93, 287n5; rationalism and, 26–28, 259n31, 284n4; reliable knowledge

- and, 127, 139; roots of, 12; sore losers and, 146; values and, 148, 153, 157; wholesale, 183
- smallpox, 218
- social construction, 43–50, 220, 262n70, 262n76
- social costs of carbon (SCC), 191–92
- socialism, 28, 97, 101–2, 128, 136, 146, 173, 249, 273n86
- social turn, 4, 54, 57
- sociologists, 9, 20, 43–50, 55, 57, 108, 127, 150–51, 177, 262n70
- Sokal, Alan, 234
- Solomon, 158
- Soviet Union, 170, 216
- speculation, 1, 213, 235–36
- speed of light, 34
- Spiro, Jonathan, 91–92
- Stanford prison experiment, 204, 231–32, 290n23
- Stapel, Diederik, 203
- Stark, Laura, 143, 265n117
- Station for Experimental Evolution, 92, 272n71
- statistics, 12, 275n116; birth control and, 114–16; cancer clusters and, 281n14; correlation and, 116–17; dental floss and, 122; eugenics and, 102; experts and, 281n14; inadequate training in, 74; p-hacking and, 207, 229; reliable knowledge and, 133–34; misuse of, 73, 230, 268n13; system values and, 209
- Steen, Grant, 235
- Steinberg, Arthur, 171–72, 285n21, 285n22
- sterilization, 61, 78, 88, 93–94, 98, 101, 138, 272n62, 272n75, 274n97
- structural realists, 268n12
- Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Kuhn), 39, 261n65
- Stump v. Sparkman*, 272n75
- suicide, 88, 95, 109–10, 113, 117, 275n121
- sunscreen, 13, 245, 250–55, 294n10, 294n11, 294n13
- sunspots, 63
- superstition, 20, 22, 24, 54, 263n91
- surveillance, 151, 177
- survival of fittest, 78, 89
- Tanner Lectures, 2, 13, 245, 271n41
- technofideists, 61
- technology: epistemologies and, 9, 164–69, 175, 178–80, 215–21; physics and, 152; policy assessments and, 193, 195; present and future of science and, 210; purity and, 168; Sagan on, 179; science and, 9, 152, 164, 166–69, 175, 178–80, 193, 213, 215–21, 284n2, 287n5; weapons and, 166–70, 177, 179, 216
- teleology, 20–21, 23
- Tello, Monique, 107–8
- Ten Commandments, 156–57
- tenure, 58, 210–11
- Termier, Pierre, 83–84
- tetanus, 16
- theology, 20–21, 70, 150, 228, 287n6
- theoretical anarchism, 47–48
- thermodynamics, 33, 35, 76–77, 138
- Thessalonians, Bible book of, 282n26
- Thomas, M. Carey, 78
- thought collectives, 28–32
- tobacco industry: cancer and, 65, 115, 239; diseases from products of, 65–66, 71, 123, 239; evidence and, 142; heart disease and, 65; misinformation and, 1, 65–67, 129, 142, 281n3,

- tobacco industry (continued)  
290n26; paid studies and, 213,  
240–42, 292n44; suppressed  
information and, 65–66, 266n136
- Traditional Chinese Medicine  
(TCM), 62
- traditions, 37, 43, 60, 62–63, 78,  
102, 136, 165, 209, 220, 235, 260n39,  
262n70
- transparency, 79, 152, 164, 178, 198,  
211–12, 227
- Trump, Donald: climate science and,  
10, 13, 191–92, 194, 293n3; exercise  
and, 269n25; petroleum industry  
and, 194; policy assessments and,  
191–92, 194; social costs of carbon  
(SCC) and, 191–92; vaccinations  
and, 15–16, 71
- trust: birth control and, 104–17; con-  
sensus and, 2 (*see also* consensus);  
continental drift and, 80–87; crisis  
of, 1, 3, 13, 19, 237; dental floss and,  
118–27; empiricism and, 24–30;  
epistemologies and, 49–59; eugen-  
ics and, 87–104; everyday, 9,  
163–66, 177–79; faith and, 36, 56, 66,  
68, 168, 178, 183; full disclosure and,  
66, 237, 243, 269n14, 272n66; great  
men and, 3; informed, 4, 60, 141;  
Limited Energy Theory and,  
76–80; Pascal's Wager and, 140–46;  
peer review and, 3, 7, 9, 32, 53, 58, 66,  
75, 130–31, 140, 145–46, 182, 221, 237,  
240–41, 247, 252, 266n136, 293n55;  
policy assessments and, 191–201;  
positive knowledge and, 19–23; and  
present and future of science, 206;  
reliable knowledge and, 127–39;  
revisions and, 32, 36, 38, 199–200,  
247; science studies and, 39–49;  
social effects and, 12, 18, 55, 57–58,  
64, 68, 128, 141, 149, 152, 164, 166,  
173, 175, 178, 192–93, 222, 225,  
246–47, 268n4; values and, 8  
(*see also* values)
- truth: circularity and, 181; complete  
grasp of, 7; consensus and, 222, 249;  
criterion for, 183; critical interroga-  
tion and, 58–60, 68, 137, 246, 266n136,  
284n2; dimensional homogeneity  
and, 188–89; disclosure and, 66, 237,  
243, 269n14, 272n66; empiricism  
and, 24, 32; epistemologies and, 50,  
165, 169, 175, 177, 179; eugenics and,  
100; innovation and, 208–9;  
instability of scientific, 74–75;  
intellectual honesty and, 13;  
justification and, 7, 24, 26, 42, 68, 71,  
95–98, 151, 158, 183–86, 191, 198, 217,  
224, 282n26; Limited Energy Theory  
and, 79; observation and, 19, 21, 24,  
74; peer review and, 3, 7, 9, 32, 53, 58,  
66, 75, 130–31, 140, 145–46, 182, 221,  
237, 240–41, 247, 252, 266n136, 293n55;  
petroleum industry and, 4; positive  
knowledge and, 21, 249; post-truth,  
70; present and future of science  
and, 202, 206, 208; production of,  
137; reliable knowledge and, 131, 137,  
139; science studies and, 4–5, 46–49;  
shared interest in, 5, 68; structural  
realism and, 268n12; temporary, 72,  
74–75; transparency and, 79, 152, 164,  
178, 198, 211–12, 227; utility and, 19,  
151, 218–19; values and, 151; Weinberg  
on, 269n19
- Tuве, Merle, 169–70
- Tyson, Charlie, 263n91

- ultraviolet (UV) light, 252–54, 295n17
- under-determination, 10, 32–39, 43, 190
- United Nations, 17, 148, 226
- US Geological Survey, 69
- US National Academy of Sciences, 19, 59, 146, 233
- utility, 19, 150–52, 218
- Vaccination Act, 218
- vaccinations: autism and, 15, 63, 108, 129, 154, 275n114; Carson and, 15; celebrities and, 16; compulsory, 224; confusion over risks of, 15–16; conscience and, 218; consensus and, 218; delaying, 16; Denmark and, 107–8; dissent against, 6; effectiveness of, 1–2; epistemologies and, 170, 175, 179; evidence and, 275n114; noncompliance and, 218; parents and, 16, 129, 218, 224, 245; Pence and, 16; preventable diseases and, 16; rejection of, 16, 63, 218, 257n1; reliable knowledge and, 129, 219; religion and, 63; safety of, 15–16, 69, 129, 275n109; Salk, 170; smallpox, 218; social consequences and, 18; Trump and, 15–16, 71; values and, 154
- values: American lifestyle and, 148; asymmetry of application and, 138; biology and, 152; chemical weapons and, 166–67, 169, 177; climate change and, 148, 153–58, 282n23; conscience clause and, 218; diversity and, 156–58; economic issues and, 147–51; environmentalists and, 8; ethics and, 10, 44, 61, 124, 143, 145, 158, 193, 196–200, 227–28, 265n117, 287n5; evidence and, 6, 8, 65, 121, 127–28, 145, 153–54, 192; evolution and, 148–49; experts and, 149; falsehoods and, 152–53, 156–58, 282n23; God and, 148, 152, 156, 158; innovation and, 208–9; Limited Energy Theory and, 136; misapplication of theory and, 138; moral issues and, 7 (*see also* moral issues); neutrality and, 8, 10–11, 149–55, 200, 227, 283n28; oceanography and, 151; policy assessments and, 147, 192–93, 196–201; pragmatism and, 10, 197–98; productivity and, 208; Puritans and, 151; purity and, 9, 11, 150, 168, 198, 215, 284n10; reliable knowledge and, 136–38; religion and, 2, 7, 147–50, 155–58, 167, 258n12; Republicans and, 148–49, 153, 155; scientific method and, 149; scientific virtue and, 167; skepticism and, 148, 153, 157; statistics and, 211; Tanner Lectures and, 2, 13, 245, 271n41; Ten Commandments and, 156–57; truth and, 151; vaccinations and, 154
- verbal overshadowing, 203
- verification, 3, 24–27, 40
- Vienna Circle, 24, 25, 32, 39
- Vietnam War, 172
- Vitamin D, 251, 254–55, 295n17
- von Braun, Werner, 61
- voodoo correlations, 204
- Wall Street Journal*, 132, 140
- Wang, Amy B., 169–71
- warfare, 9, 147, 151, 167, 177, 216
- water, 165, 237
- weapons, 166–70, 177, 179, 216
- weather, 1, 15, 116, 140, 152
- Wegener, Alfred, 81–82, 86–87, 139, 146, 261n53

- Weinberg, Steven, 263n88, 269n19
- Weller, Richard B., 250–53
- Werner, Abraham, 83
- “When Contact Changes Minds”  
(*Science*), 205
- Whitehead, A. N., 259n30
- “Why Most Published Research  
Findings Are False” (Ioannidis), 207
- Willis, Bailey, 82–84
- Wisdom of Solomon, 158
- women: birth control and, 2, 5–6,  
104–17, 140; Clarke and, 76–80, 89,  
135–39, 226–27, 270n33, 270n40;  
depression and, 2, 5–6, 104–17, 140;  
estrogen and, 113, 117, 125; eugenics  
and, 78, 88, 91, 93, 95, 100–101;  
fertility and, 5, 76–77, 135; gynecolo-  
gists and, 111, 128, 250; higher  
education for, 76–80, 135, 138, 226,  
270n40; inclusion and, 14, 51, 59;  
Limited Energy Theory and, 5, 7,  
76–80, 89, 95, 128, 136, 249, 264n97,  
270n40, 273n78; menstruation and,  
78–80; mood changes and, 107, 109,  
112, 114. *See also* feminism
- World Health Organization (WHO),  
109
- World War I, 166, 285n22
- World War II, 88, 166, 280n203,  
285n22
- WRVO, 119
- Wynne, Brian, 142–43, 279n192
- Zammito, John, 45–46, 262n70
- Zimbardo, Phil, 204
- Zoloff, 114