CONTENTS

Acknowledgments  xiii
Preface to the Paperback Edition  xv
Preface: Toward Dialogue  xxiii

1 Fundamentalism Writ Large  1
   The End of Days?  1
   Fundamentalism Abounds  4

2 Fundamentalism and Its Alternatives:
   From Fanaticism to Dialogue  12
   Part 1: The Fundamentalist Style of Thought  12
      Conception and Evolution  12
      Fundamentalist Criterion #1: Certainty  22
      Negative Fundamentalism  35
      Fundamentalist Criterion #2: The Perspicuity of Truth  39
      Fundamentalist Criterion #3: Foundational Text or Revelation  47
   Part 2: Alternatives  51
      Assertion and Dialogue  51
      Alternatives: Just in Case  57
Contents

Avoiding Extremisms 64
Alternatives: The Wisdom of the Novel 65
Acquiring Wisdom 67
Alternatives: Dialogue and Truth 70

3 Divided We Stand: The Politics of Hate 75
   Joined Together by Hatred of the “Other” 75
   Tables Turned 78
   Fundamentalism and Democracy in Tension 84
   Pseudoscience 90
   Criticism and the Experience of Others 100
   Criticism and Certainty 103
   Novels and Utopias 110
   Satire and Systems 116
   The Silo 121
   United by Hatred or Hope? 124

4 Price and Prejudice: Economics and the Quest for Truth 129
   Another Kind of Fundamentalism 129
   The Economics of Hate? 140
   Learning from Objective Analyses 142
   Let Justice Be Done, Though the World Perish: Dealing with Climate Change 145
   Not Just Climate Change 156
   Prejudice and Price 165
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Searching for Eternal Truths: Religion and Its Discontents</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A Rabbi’s Parable</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Clock and the Dictionary</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>When Standards Become Mere Prejudice</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Challenging Stories</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Relevance of the Timeless</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Compassion and Holiness</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Equivalents</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How Scripture Reads</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Difference That Science Makes</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How Old Is the World?</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Propositions and Prayer</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Great Dialogue</td>
<td>232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adjusting the Clock</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Literature: How to Ruin It and Why</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You Shouldn’t</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alibis for Reading</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Literature Lost</td>
<td>247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Need for Stories</td>
<td>257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>World Literature</td>
<td>263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Equivalent Centers of Self</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
xii CONTENTS

7 A Path Forward 273
   How the New Fundamentalisms Are Connected 275
   Return to Dialogue 279
   Chekhov with the Final Word 283

Index 291
1

Fundamentalism Writ Large

The End of Days?

Perhaps the world balances on a precipice. Could it be that if we make the slightest mistake, life as we know it would end? Or does that way of thinking reflect what sociologist Barry Glassner has aptly called “the culture of fear”?¹

Our predispositions can mislead either way: complacency can be comforting, but looming disaster makes us feel important. Movements that warn of an imminent apocalypse usually foresee special treatment for a favored few, a “saving remnant.” Or they at least flatter those who can discern the signs others miss.

Climate change is upon us, political differences have become toxic, authoritarian governments are on the rise, and younger generations are losing confidence that market economies and democratic processes can lead to equitable outcomes. It seems that the latest industrial revolution is destroying jobs every day.

The notion of free speech for all—an axiom until recently—has

grown almost quaint. And when people are not allowed to criticize orthodoxies, societies get locked into destructive thought patterns and policies.

Doom, it seems, is everywhere. If anything, the global pandemic has made things even worse.

But when haven’t predictions of impending disaster been the norm? It seems that what all generations share is the conviction that they live at the most important, and often most perilous, period in human history. And they think so sincerely, because the criteria of importance belong to the present, while what earlier epochs regarded as important seems much less so as time goes on. How, we wonder today, could people have fought wars about the nature of divine grace, or what exactly goes on during the Eucharist?

The trademark irony that marks Edward Gibbon’s masterpiece *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* depends on the difference between what his age and what antiquity regarded as of supreme significance. What the early Christians were willing to die for now seems almost impossible to explain, let alone take seriously. In his ironic catalog of theological squabbles that, in the opinion of the early Christians, would determine the salvation of humanity, he mentions one about the exact wording of the Trisagon, the chant of “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of Hosts” that the angels sing to God: “In the fever of the times, the sense, or rather the sound, of a syllable was sufficient to disturb the peace of an empire. . . . The Trisagon . . . was chanted in the cathedral by two adverse choirs, and when

2. Perhaps they feel that way because, as Marcel Proust put it, we “imagine ourselves always to be going through an experience which is without precedents in the past.” Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, vol. 1., trans. C. Scott Moncrieff and Stephen Hudson, loc. 23336 of 51336, Kindle.
their lungs were exhausted, they had recourse to the more solid arguments of sticks and stones.” We laugh today at the absurd fears and controversies of our predecessors, but we, too, succumb to a “fever of the times.”

All the same, to understand an earlier period is to grasp what people then feared or expected. What Bertrand de Jouvenel called “futuribles”—the sense of possible futures—are an inescapable part of each present moment, which those living through it almost inevitably regard as singled out by destiny. There is an egoism of time, and part of this sense of unparalleled importance is that unprecedented dangers await just around the corner.

We take some comfort in the fact that this type of thinking almost always proves incorrect. Are today’s challenges really as threatening as, for example, the destruction wrought by Genghis Khan, or the twentieth century’s two world wars? Is there anyone now who poses as great a danger as Adolf Hitler or Joseph Stalin? We both remember the daily terror of nuclear annihilation that, in our school years, had children crouching next to their lockers or under their desks, coats covering our heads, as we waited to see how the Cuban Missile Crisis turned out. By that standard, even in the wake of COVID-19, these days don’t seem quite so scary.

And yet, as amateur golfers know when they hit a six iron and end up a foot from the hole, unlikely things do happen. Some predictions of disaster are, alas, realized; catastrophes do occur, and they make skeptics look foolish. The outbreak of the


4. While we did what we were told, we never quite understood how our coats would protect us from a nuclear attack.
coronavirus may remind us that the Black Death, which wiped out a substantial part of the world’s population, could be repeated, if not by this pandemic, then by another. Those who successfully predict catastrophes—the way Dostoevsky predicted what we now call “totalitarianism”—are in their time regarded as, at best, highly eccentric. They become prophets only in retrospect.

Perhaps this time the world really is on a precipice, with democracy, freedom, and other cherished principles at risk should it teeter in the wrong direction. While we do not see the present as the most dangerous of times, we do discern some serious threats with common features that need to be addressed. And the sooner, the better.

Fundamentalism Abounds

So urgent . . . is the necessity of believing, that the fall of any system of mythology, will most probably be succeeded by the introduction of some other mode of superstition.

—Edward Gibbon, Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire

We sense a danger in what we call a new “fundamentalism,” a term we use in a special sense elaborated at length in chapter 2. That fundamentalism has infected not only politics, but also many other areas of thought. Not so long ago, it seemed as if belief in “grand narratives,” or “metanarratives,” as Jean-François Lyotard observed, was over. No longer would people rush to


adopt theories that purport to explain everything (or, at least, everything pertaining to a whole domain of human experience). Also not so long ago, it was an unchallenged commonplace that cultures are undergoing a far-reaching secularization that, in spite of occasional resistance, is unstoppable. The rise of militant Islam, and what some have termed “fundamentalist Hinduism,” have called the “secularization thesis” into question. Where are the inevitabilities of yesteryear?

We often flatter ourselves that, when ideas or policies lead to terrible consequences, people eventually admit their error and change course. But, in matters touching their very sense of self, or a movement’s very reason for being, the opposite often happens; disconfirmation turns into confirmation. Failure, it is argued, was due to lack of sufficient rigor in executing the policy. That is the logic that led Stalin to proclaim the “intensification of the class struggle” after the Revolution, when no opposition was visible. Greater vigilance is demanded, and a bigger dose of the dubious medicine is administered. The more extreme the theory, the less is disconfirmation possible.

When people adopt extreme theories, they discover dangers that justify extreme actions. That is because such theories teach a way of viewing the world that (as we shall see) reveals only confirming evidence. When extreme and still more extreme action is taken, the result may indeed be horrific. What was meant to solve a serious problem creates a still more serious one. Call it “the self-fulfilling catastrophe.”

In the United States and Europe, discussions of political polarization are everywhere. The rise both of the far left and the far right poses a threat different in both degree and kind from that entailed by a bad policy decision, which might be corrected. Some of these movements may fall prey to forms of fundamentalist thinking that make correction impossible. Matters grow still worse when one fundamentalism confronts another.
Clinging to opposite poles, they accuse each other of all sins, including polarization.

Beyond the political arena, we see analogous conflicts among fundamentalisms. What might be called “market fundamentalism” (as opposed to a general inclination to market solutions) insists categorically, and on a priori grounds, on deploying market solutions everywhere economically possible. And not only there: it also applies market models to disciplines and areas of life remote from economics. These models are offered not as a contribution to another discipline, but as its replacement. Just as some sociobiologists have never met a human behavior they could not explain, so some economists have never encountered problems that could not best be solved by the tools of economics.

This market fundamentalism encounters an opposite one, a revival of the sort of thinking that the failure of the “socialist bloc” had seemingly consigned to what Leon Trotsky called “the dustbin of history.” In this view, capitalism cannot be compassionate any more than the plague can be healthy. Some have described these opposites in terms of a generation gap—which, if true, seems as wide as the Grand Canyon.

We are speaking here not of arguments between those who favor either a market or a government solution to this or that problem, but to those who think categorically, so that the answer to any question is known as soon as the question is posed. The answer is always privatization or nationalization, drastically

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cutting or increasing regulations, radically lowering or raising taxes.

Categorical thinking admits no compromise and allows no correction in light of results. On the contrary, as we have noted, it makes the failure of a policy the reason for more of it. It is this kind of thinking, not just the bad solutions to which it might lead, that we find especially dangerous. While dangerous in itself, it is still more so because it prevents learning from experience. Alchemy failed to transmute base metals into gold, but this intellectual alchemy successfully converts reasons against a course of action into reasons for still more of it.

Some fundamentalisms cause more havoc than others. The political is usually the most dangerous, with the economic close behind. But when a given way of thinking becomes routine, it affects areas less vital but still significant. It is worth examining these areas to see how the fundamentalist way of thinking manifests itself. The more examples, the clearer it becomes. And, by the same token, if one can show what the alternative looks like in area after area, one might more successfully arrest the harmful tendency.

In our classes, we have seen students who adopt fundamentalist ways of thinking almost by default: not as a choice, but because they imagine that is just what thinking is. These students seem genuinely surprised that there are situations where one cannot find a uniquely correct answer, where one needs to make choices under uncertainty, and where those who recommend a different course of action might turn out to be right. By showing what other ways of thinking there might be, we have at least encouraged some of them, even if they remain fundamentalists, to be so more reflectively, precisely because what had been automatic has become a choice. As Mikhail Bakhtin liked to say, the old way of regarding things has become
“contested, contestable, and contesting.” As we discuss in chapter 2, when that happens, people have moved from a “Ptolemaic universe,” which they regard as the unchallenged center of things, to a “Galilean” one, where theirs is but one of many planets—or as sociologists like to say, their world has lost its “taken-for-grantedness.”

Some students take the next step and recognize that the more circumspect alternatives we offer may be better. Each time students recognize them, they become more thoughtful. In a course we teach together, we treat a variety of disciplines, including economics, city planning, history, and philosophy. In the present volume, we turn our attention to two others: religion and literary study. The fate of the world does not depend, as English professors sometimes seem ready to maintain, on the nature of the canon or of interpretation, but the issues are still significant. They happen to display one or another version of fundamentalism, different from but recognizably resembling those we have seen in politics and economics.

We wonder about the persistence of an old conflict in religion, which has been with us for a century or more, but may now be reviving and intensifying. Like the early twentieth-century Christian fundamentalists, who invented this sobriquet, there are those who see no alternative to an unchangeable idea of the sacred and what it demands, other than a radical relativism that makes Scripture and faith mean whatever seems most in accord with present beliefs. By the same token, those


who think that Scripture means whatever current thought needs it to mean see no alternative to their view but rigid adherence to ideas that at best make no sense and, at worst, are morally repellent. The idea of a principled middle ground seems like cowardice or intellectual inconsistency. In a pattern we shall see repeated, a positive fundamentalism encounters a negative fundamentalism, and ne’er the twain shall meet.

In the study of the humanities, a similar dynamic repeats itself in various issues. This is hardly surprising for disciplines that abandoned structuralism, with its aspiration to be a theory of everything, for deconstruction and other theories of nothing. Almost overnight, a purported hard science of culture was replaced by a radical skepticism denying the possibility of knowledge. One would have made even Plato smile, the other even Hume blush. One might suppose that a radical skeptic would, like Hume, be anything but militant, but, when we are dealing with fundamentalisms, the very reverse is the case. There is such a thing as missionary nihilism, and in the humanities we have seen it.

The questions surrounding “the canon” pertain not just to what works should be included in it, or what qualities make literary works great, but to the very notion of great literature. In literary studies there seem to be no positive fundamentalists left, or, at least, none that admit to being so. Negative fundamentalism reigns supreme. Few would defend, at least publicly, the proposition that the determinate meaning of a text is to be found either in the author’s intention or in the text itself. The very notion of determinate meaning, like that of objective value, is suspect. It is not that nonsubjective meaning and value are difficult to ascertain, and that evidence can point in different directions; rather, they are, like God for Nietzsche—dead. Issues remote from these, which are not really literary at all,
have consequently taken their place. Literary scholars, who for decades have been denouncing, deconstructing, and decolonizing the canon, and who have established the orthodoxy that literary value is a myth, wonder why enrollments in literature courses have declined. Somewhere there must be atheist pastors baffled by their empty pews.

In our view, great literature, which surely exists, teaches a lesson the very opposite of fundamentalisms, positive or negative. That is especially true of the great realist novels, which often take fundamentalist styles of thinking as their topic (“the novel of ideas”). As we shall see, all literary genres have presuppositions—you don’t write a saint’s life if you don’t believe in holiness, or an epic if you scorn heroism—and the realist novel presumes the irreducible complexity of individual psychology, culture, society, and ethical questions. The finest novelists (Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Joseph Conrad, Henry James, George Eliot, and Jane Austen) offer readers marvelous experiences in nonfundamentalist thinking. Their works contain a deep wisdom, a real alternative to fundamentalisms, and we shall therefore be returning to them frequently. If we allow them to teach us to think more complexly, we can address many other questions more wisely.

We suspect that these new fundamentalisms, in politics, economics, religion and literature, demand a common response. It is time to be sure at least that fundamentalism is not adopted by default.

Talking with colleagues and students, we sometimes have the impression that they have no clear idea as to what an alternative way of thinking might be. They seem to suppose either that the only alternative to a positive fundamentalism is a negative one, or that anything else is at best makeshift accommodation. But it is not true that anything short of a totalizing theory is somehow
flawed, at best a stopgap until such a theory is found. Aristotle was right to maintain that “it is the mark of an educated person to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits.”10 It is therefore important to clarify what alternatives are available, and why they are superior to totalisms in explaining human affairs, understanding specific people and cultures, formulating policies, and judging moral actions. To be effective, policies must respond to reality and therefore may go badly wrong when they are based on premises that look neat, appear symmetrical, and sound magnificent, but are untrue.

The Bolsheviks thought that human nature was infinitely malleable and perfectible to those with the right theory, who could be, in Stalin’s famous phrase, “engineers of human souls” (inzhiniry chelovecheskikh duš).11 Immanuel Kant maintained the opposite view: “From the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made.”12 When we build with such material, we must not assume all logs are straight and must look for the intransigent knots. We hope that this book will be a lesson in the carpentry appropriate for crooked timber.

12. Immanuel Kant, Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View, proposition 6, in On History, ed. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1977), 17–18, where the line is given as: “From such crooked wood as man is made of, nothing perfectly straight can be built.” To render the German (Aus so krummem Holze, als woraus der Mensch gemacht ist, kann nichts ganz Gerades gezimmert werden), we prefer Isaiah Berlin’s version. See Berlin, The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas (New York: Knopf, 1991), xi.
INDEX

Abraham, 189–90, 189n, 194, 208–9
adherents of fundamentalisms: contempt/despair shown by, to nonadherents, xxvii, 30–31, 33; monitoring of, 108; psychology of, 33–34, 82–83, 125–26; reversal of fortunes of (becoming the enemy), 78–83. See also nonadherents of fundamentalisms
Affordable Care Act, 162
Afghanistan, 16
afterlife, 211
Agamemnon, 192
agnosticism, xxv, 35, 36
Aitken, George A., 66n135
Alexandria, library of, 199
Algerian Armed Islamic Group, 16
Ali, Tariq, 20
allegory, 206–7, 216
all-or-nothing mentality: about climate change, 146–56; about free speech, 254–55; about politics, 256; about science, 90–100; Soviet thought characterized by, 77, 94, 105, 106–7. See also compromise; extremism; us vs. them mentality
Almond, Gabriel A. See Strong Religion
Al Qaeda, 16
Alter, Robert, 190, 195–96
alternatives to fundamentalism: casuistry as instance of, 57–65; dialogue as chief among, 70–74, 279–83; encounters with, 7–8; Erasmus-Luther exchange as instance of, 51–56; features of, xxv, 10–11; fundamentalist attacks on, xxv; ignorance of, 10; novels as instance of, 65–73, 244
animals, religious classification of, 216–18
anthropology, 86–87
Antigone, 209–10
anti-Semitism, 277
apocalyptic thinking: attraction of, 1–2; evidence when subjected to, 5; in politics, 280; presentism implicit in, 2–3; religion as basis for, 2–3, 35; successful predictions and, 3–4; theories underlying, 5. See also revolutionism
Appleby, R. Scott. See Strong Religion
argument. See criticism; dialogue; disagreement
argumentum ad lapidem, 38
Aristophanes, The Clouds, 118
Aristotle: on ethics, 58–62; on necessity and contingency, 257, 259; on purpose, 225; on reasoning, 11, 43, 58–62
Armenia, 170
Armstrong, Karen, 16–17, 21, 26
atheists, 10, 29, 36, 114, 201, 203, 226, 229–30, 242, 242n, 248
Auden, W. H., 144
Austen, Jane, 10, 113, 207, 240, 244, 267; Emma, 268; Pride and Prejudice, 71–72, 245, 268
autonomy, 204–5
Avenarius, Richard, 106
Bacon, Francis, 26, 27, 40, 92
Bakhtin, Mikhail, 7–8, 70–73, 193, 232–35, 244, 260–61, 263, 268, 272
Bakunin, Michael, 248–49, 278
Barthes, Roland, “The Death of the Author,” 251–53
Bazelon, Emily, 48n
Becker, Gary, 24, 31, 45, 131
Bentham, Jeremy, 23, 24, 57
Berger, Peter, 21n26, 36
Berkeley, Bishop, 40–41
Berlin, Isaiah, 22, 280
Bhagavad-Gita, 264
Biden, Joe, 274
Bierce, Ambrose, 20, 264
Bill of Rights, 194–95, 236n
Black Death, 4
Blake, William, 42–43
Blanchard, Charles, 46
Boot, Max, 141
Boswell, James, 40–41
Brexit, 141
Breyer, Stephen, 48n
Bryan, William Jennings, 15
Bukharin, Nikolai, 79
Bulgakov, Mikhail, 120; The Master and Margarita, 248
Bush, George H. W., 123
Butler, R. A., 274
Buttigieg, Pete, 81
calendar, 238
Calvin, John, 128, 192
capitalism, 6, 136
carbon emissions, 145–56
Carlyle, Thomas, 165
Carroll, Lewis, Through the Looking-Glass, 182, 242
Case, Shirley Jackson, 14
casuistry (case-based reasoning), 38–70, 74, 255, 281–82, 281n13. See also practical reasoning
categorical thinking, 6–7
Catholicism, 19, 43
central planning. See command economies
certainty: criticism in relation to, 103–9; dangers resulting from strong commitment to, xxvii, 35–36, 38–39, 85–86, 89; disconfirming
evidence vs., 32–33; as fundamentalist characteristic, xxiv, 7, 22–35, 85–86, 90; hatred linked to, 126–27; morality and, xxvii, 34–35; novels as antidote to worldview based on, 73, 114; opinion in relation to, 85; popular misunderstanding of, 7, 90; psychological appeal of, 125–26; science in relation to, 90–92; simplification linked to, 24–25. See also complexity and uncertainty; truth

Charisma (magazine), 81
Chaucer, Geoffrey, 185
Chechnya, 16
Chicherin, Georgy, 106
Christian fundamentalism: certainty as feature of, 8, 14, 31; inerrancy of scripture in, 13–14, 43, 275–76; nonreligious fundamentalisms compared to, 28; in politics, 81–82; scientific claims made by, 26–27, 31–32; truth as perspicuous in, 39, 43–44, 46
Clausewitz, Carl von, 273
climate change, 95–96, 145–56
Clinton, Hillary, 124n, 128
clock parable, 181–82, 200, 236
Club of Rome, 94
Coase theorem, 130n1
“Come, let us reason together,” 77
command economies: failures of, 132, 135–36, 158, 167–75, 279; Soviet Union as, 135, 167–74
Common Sense philosophy, 26, 40–41
Communist Party, 33–34. See also Marxism-Leninism; Soviet Union

compassion, 138, 202–4. See also empathy; sympathy
complexity and uncertainty: decision making in situations of, 7; dialogue as tool suited for, 56; domains characterized by, 59; economic life characterized by, 174–75; fear of, 54, 115, 125, 280; negative capability and, 221; the novel’s worldview based on, 10, 66, 68–69, 110–14, 116, 207–8, 240–41, 243–44, 261–72, 282; opinion—not dogmatism—suited for, 85, 100–101; practical—not theoretical—reasoning suited for, 59, 175; religious faith as response to, 231; satire’s worldview based on, 116; science—in contrast to pseudoscience—characterized by, 95
complicity, 81–83
compromise: democracy characterized by, xxiv, 64, 274, 280; hostility toward, xxiv, xxv, 7, 77, 105. See also all-or-nothing mentality
Comte, Auguste, 23–24, 86, 89
Condorcet, Marquis de, 25, 57
confirmation/disconfirmation, 5, 32, 53, 120
Confucianism, 131, 198
Conquest, Robert, 172
Conrad, Joseph, 10
conservativism: criticism of, during World War I, 14–15
constitutions, 194–95, 213, 238. See also U.S. Constitution
Corbyn, Jeremy, 158
COVID-19 pandemic, xxv–xxvi, 2, 3–4, 30, 96–100, 175, 246
criticism: certainty in relation to, 103–9; as feature of dialogue, 55–56;
criticism (continued)

function of, in fundamentalist worldview, 104–5; necessity of, 100–103; others’ experiences as source of, 74, 100–103, 278; refinement of thought by means of, 74, 84–85, 100–103. See also dialogue; disagreement; higher criticism, of the Bible; perspective-taking

“crooked timber of humanity” (Kant), 11, 280

Crusades, 19

Cuban Missile Crisis, 3

Cultural Revolution, 115

cultural studies, 253

culture: dialogic perspective on, 74; literature as lens on, 263–65; moral differences in, 202–5

culture wars, 239

Dagestan, 16

danger, attributed when fundamentalist claims are not embraced, 3, 5, 98–100

Daniel, 188

Darwinism/evolution, 15, 27, 45, 49, 88, 92–93, 216n62, 224

David, 192

Davies, William, 141

death, 242–43

death of the author, 251–53

deconstruction, 9

Defoe, Daniel, 65–66, 282; Moll Flanders, 66, 240

democracy: characteristic features of, xxiv, xxv, xxvi, 77, 273–74; compromise as feature of, xxiv, 64, 274, 280; dialogic thinking as feature of, 74, 76–77, 84–85, 282–83; disagreement as feature of, 76, 84; fundamental-
divisiveness and polarization: contemporary manifestations of, 5; extremism as cause of, 5–6, 64–65; group-based, 128n93; human attraction to, xxiii; social and political effects of, xxiii–xxiv
Dixon, A. C., 13, 26–27
“dog whistle,” 109
“dotted lines,” 272
double vision (thought), 220–21
double voicing, 267–72
doubt, 33, 36, 125–26. See also skepticism
Douglas, Mary, 215–17
Dryden, John, 185
Dukakis, Michael, 123
“dustbin of history” (Trotsky), 6, 278, 289
earth, age of, 221, 225–26
Ecclesiastes, book of, 192, 213, 238
Einstein, Albert, 91
Ehrlich, Paul, 94–95
Engels, Friedrich, 24, 28–29, 32, 47, 48–49, 88, 93, 166, 166n48, 202, 258–59; Socialism: Utopian and Scientific, 259
“engineers of human souls” (Stalin), 11
epistemology. See knowledge/epistemology
Erasmus, Desiderius, 22, 51–57, 74, 281
ethics. See morality
eugenics, 27, 92
Euripides, 45; Iphigenia in Aulis, 192
evidence, fundamentalism’s treatment of, 5, 9, 20, 32–33, 49, 109
evil, ascribed to nonadherents of fundamentalism, 23, 34, 64, 77, 83, 86, 104, 105, 109, 121, 127
evolution. See Darwinism/evolution
Existentialism, 241
experience. See perception/experience, theories of
expertise: ineffectual use of, 143, 166–68; positive use of, 99, 144, 176
externalities, 129, 129–30n
“extraneous historical forces” (Engels), 166
extremism: in economics, 140–42; epistemological, 36; polarization resulting from, 5–6, 64–65; in public opinion, 76; silos as contributing factor to, 122; status quo as target of, 140; vicious cycle of, 5, 82–83; violence resulting from, 114–15.
See also all-or-nothing mentality
“eye for an eye,” 211
Facebook, xxiii
facts: in analyses of contemporary social issues, 145–65; in contemporary information environment, 141–42; cultural or relativistic perspective on, 37; numbers regarded as, 143–45; reinterpretation of myths as, by fundamentalisms, 26, 29–30; revelation of truth behind, by fundamentalisms, 33–34; role of, in dialogue and argument, xxvi, 180; values in relation to, 29, 215, 224
faculty, university, 136–37
fairness, 132, 132n, 165–67
faith, religious, 19, 25, 212, 225, 228–31, 243
“false choices,” 137, 139, 145
false consciousness, 47
falsifiability, of science, 32, 90–91, 278
family, 202–3
family resemblances, theoretical concept of, 17–18, 20
famine, 94–95
fanaticism, xv, 22, 124–25, 199, 240.
See also ideological thinking
Farias, Bert, 81–82, 82n
Ferguson, Neil, 96–99, 97n33
Fielding, Henry, 263
Finnish Green Party, 150
First Amendment, 194–95, 254
Fish, Stanley, 254–56
Fitzgerald, F. Scott, 220
Flaubert, Gustave, Madame Bovary, 245
Floyd, George, xxv
Foucault, Michel, “What Is an Author?,” 252–53n24
fox vs. hedgehog analogy, 22–23, 44, 52, 58
fracking, 150, 155
free indirect discourse. See double voicing
Freemasonry, 38
free speech, 1–2, 56, 254–55
free trade, 160–61
French Revolution, 82
Freud, Sigmund, 23, 24, 47, 48, 51, 87–88, 241
Freudianism, 28, 29, 32, 48
Fukuyama, Francis, 136
fundamentalism: binary worldview of, xxiv–xxv, 9, 35, 36–38, 77, 105; categorical thinking and certainty as characteristics of, xxiv, 6–7, 22–35, 85–86, 90, 277; coining of the word, 15; conception and evolution of, 12–15; contempt/disdain for nonadherents as feature of, xxvii, 30–31, 33, 104–7; dangers of, 4; democracy in tension with, 84–89; domains of thought affected by, xxiv–xxv, 4, 8, 275–79; economic (see market-based in this entry); epistemological, 23; everyday manifestations of, 7–8; evidence as handled by, 5, 9,
global pandemic. See COVID-19 pandemic

God: in Abraham story, 208; contemporary lack of belief in, 201; death of, 9; humans’ knowledge of, 52–53; Islamic conception of, 19; science in relation to, 215; secular versions of, 28, 90; as source of truth, 23, 26, 43–44, 50

God substitute, 28, 90

Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, 263

Gorbachev, Mikhail, 173
government, economic role of, 129–30, 134–36, 165–66. See also command economies
grand narratives, 4–5
Greek romance, 260–62
Greek tragedy, 44–45, 191–92, 209–10
Green New Deal, 151
Green Party (Finland), 150
green revolution, 94–95
Gresham’s law, 142
“group polarization” (Sunstein), 128n93
Gupta, Sunetra, 99

Gusev, S. I., 108

Halévy, Élie, 23

Hamas, 16

harm, principle of, 204

Harvard faculty, politics of, 137n

hatred: certainty linked to, 126–27; as motivating factor, 75, 126–28, 288; in politics, 76–77, 80–81, 83, 109, 273–74, 287–88; socialization into, 122, 124

Head Start program, 159

health policy, 162

hedgehog vs. fox analogy, 22–23, 44, 52, 58

Hegel, G.W.F., 22, 28–29
“heretic in the truth” (Milton), 90, 152
Heschel, Abraham Joshua, 201
higher criticism, of the Bible, 13–15, 51, 213–14
Hill, Howard, 167–68
Hinduism, fundamentalist, 5
history: in cosmic perspective, 221; end of, 136; human control of, 166n48; narrative foundation of, 258; particularities and contingencies as subject matter of, 60, 120, 258; scientific approaches to, 24, 32, 77, 93, 258–59. See also dialectical materialism
“history is like foreign travel” (Descartes), 60
Hitler, Adolf, 3, 126, 128
Hobbes, Thomas, 178–79
Hoffer, Eric, The True Believer, 12.4–28, 124n
Holbach, Baron d’, 57
holiness, 204–5
Holton, Gerald, 25
Homer, 206, 213; The Iliad, 212–13, 263–64
homosexuality, 81–82, 82n, 194, 219
Hordern, William, 15
human affairs: complexity and uncertainty of, 111, 243–44, 259–60, 280–81; dialogue as essential to progress in, 56, 100–101; fundamentalist claims of certainty about, 86–87, 92, 117, 168, 278; non-fundamentalist explanations of, 11; the novel’s exploration of, 11, 280–81; practical—not theoretical—reasoning suited for, 60, 117, 175, 278, 280. See also human behavior
humanism and the humanities: and climate change, 149–50; decline of, 246–56, 246n, 275; and economics, 134–39, 165–67, 180; Erasmus as exemplar of, 51–57; and modernity, 57–58
human nature, 11
Hume, David, 9, 40; “Of Miracles,” 226–28
Huxley, Aldous, Brave New World, 32
Huxley, Julian, 168
idealism, 41–42
ideological thinking: dangers of, 121; Marxist criticism of, 32, 47; novels as antidote to, 73, 113–16. See also fanaticism
ignorance, ascribed to nonadherents of fundamentalist worldview, 23, 33–34, 86, 89, 93, 116, 274
Imperial College, London, 96–99
implied reader, 264
income inequality, 156–60
India, 16
individuality, 267
individualism, 131–32, 204–5
inerancy: of Bible, 13–14, 43, 212, 275–76; of fundamental texts, 47–51; of Koran, 17; of Lenin’s thought, 48–49; of Torah, 17

insanity, ascribed to nonadherents of fundamentalist worldview, 46, 89, 106, 274

intellectuals/intelligentsia, 90, 92, 117–20, 138, 179–80, 188, 241

“intensification of the class struggle” (Stalin), 5, 86

intentional fallacy, 251

“interim ethics” (Schweitzer), 203

International Monetary Fund, 133

“invisible hand” (Smith), 132–34

“Ionian enchantment,” 25

Iphigenia, 191–92

Iran, 16

irony, 114

Isaiah, xxiii

Islam, 5, 17, 19

Jacobin (magazine), 274

James, Henry, 10

James, William, 245, 259

Janik, Alan, 223–24

Jephthah, 189–91

Jews and Judaism: anti-Semitism and, 277; biblical interpretation and moral dilemmas in, 48, 189–94, 189n, 201, 205, 210–12; Reform tradition of, 237; source text of, 50, 50n94, 212–15. See also Bible

Job, book of, 44, 71–72, 192, 213

John of Patmos, 279

Johnson, Lyndon, 77

Johnson, Samuel, 40–41, 158, 185–86

Jouvenel, Bertrand de, 3

Judges, book of, 189

judgment, 62, 281

Kael, Pauline, 122

Kamenev, Lev, 106

Kant, Immanuel, 11, 40, 42, 280

Karaîtes, 48, 193

Katsenelinboigen, Aron, 49, 168–69, 174

Keats, John, 221

Kelvin, Lord, 143

Kennedy, John F., 76–77

Keynes, John Maynard, 120

Khmer Rouge, 198

Kim Il Sung, 48

King, Martin Luther, Jr., xxvii; “I Have a Dream,” 196

King James Bible, 196, 201

knowledge/epistemology: criticism as means to refining, 74, 84–85, 100–103; ethics and, 58–70; evolutionary perspective on, 45; fundamentalist approach to, 23, 120; limits of, 44–45, 53; numbers regarded as criterion of, 143; questioning of possibility of, 9, 39, 44–45; realism in, 42; relation of mind to world, 40–42, 44; silos as hindrance to, 121–22, 128n93; theoretical vs. practical reasoning, 58–70. See also certainty; ideological thinking; truth; wisdom

Koestler, Arthur, 33–34, 47, 82; Darkness at Noon, 78–80, 240

Koran, 17, 50

Kugel, James, 206, 212–15, 213, 237

laissez-faire, 132–33, 134n9, 168

language: as source of texts, rather than authors, 251–52; standards in, 182–86, 237; use and function of, in religion, 226–28, 231, 237–38

La Rochefoucauld, François de, 117
law, applications of, 60–61
Laws, Curtis Lee, 15
Lee, Harper, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, 245
Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm, 57
Lenin, V. I.: absolute conformity required by, 77; compassion shunned by, 202; death of, 79; domination of opponents by, 104–6, 256, 273; and free speech, 256; inerrancy of, 48–49; philosophical positions of, 29, 41–42, 93–94, 95, 106–7; violence attributable to, 121. *See also Marxism-Leninism*
Leonhard, Wolfgang, 49
“let justice be done, though the world perish,” 148
Lévi-Strauss, Claude, 87
Leviticus, book of, 194, 215–18
*Leviticus Rabbah*, 211
liberalism, xxv
libertarianism, 131–32
Lightfoot, Lori, xxvi
*The Limits of Growth* (Club of Rome), 94
Lincoln, Abraham, Gettysburg Address, 196
Locke, John, 40
logos, 26, 29
Lucretius, 22
Luther, Martin, 48, 51–56, 74, 126–27, 128, 277
Lyotard, Jean-François, 4
Mach, Ernst, 106
Machen, J. Gresham, 27
Macron, Emmanuel, 158
Magna Carta, 213
Malinowski, Bronislaw, 23, 30, 86–87
Mao Zedong, 48, 84, 115
market fundamentalism, 129–38, 274; assumptions about human behavior underlying, 131; basic principles of, 6, 129–30, 132–34; certainty as characteristic of, 276; critique of, 133; extension of, into other domains, 131; government’s role according to, 129–30, 134–36; Marxism-Leninism vs., 132; misconceptions of, 19, 134n9, 135–36; moral aspects of, 131–32; origin of concept, 130–31
Marsden, George, 13, 15, 26
Marxism-Leninism: conformity demanded by, 89; market fundamentalism vs., 132; mindset and thought patterns characteristic of, 32–34, 47–49, 89, 93–94, 105–9, 280;
objectivity in, 33–34, 78; pedagogical filter of, 198; as pseudoscience, 28; religion-like character of, 21; Socialist Workers’ Party endorsement of, 140. See also dialectical materialism; Lenin, V. I.; Soviet Union
mass movements, 124–27
materialism, 42. See also dialectical materialism
Mayakovsky, Vladimir, “It’s Too Early to Rejoice,” 198
McCain, John, 274
McGurn, William, 134n9
measurement and numbers, as criteria of truth/importance, 143–45, 176
Medicare, 162
Mencken, H. L., 276
Menshevism, 104, 106
metanarratives, 4–5
Michelson-Morley experiment, 91
middle ground: in contemporary sociopolitical world, 64; in economics, 159–62; as target of fundamentalists, xxv, 9, 35, 36–38, 77; as target of Soviets, xxv, 36
Midrash, 39n70, 189n, 190, 193, 210–11
Mill, John Stuart, 84–85, 89, 100–101, 204, 278
millenarianism, 13
Milton, John, 84, 90, 152, 254
mind. See knowledge/epistemology
minimum wage, 160
“minutiae of mental make,” 113
miracles, 226–28
missionary nihilism, 9
modernity, 57–58
monotheism, 19
Montaigne, Michel de, 22, 57–58, 281
Morris, William, News from Nowhere, 110, 111, 240
Morson, Gary Saul, and Morton Schapiro, Cents and Sensibility, 134, 243, 257, 268
Muller, Jerry Z., 143
Mussolini, Benito, 84
mysteries, 231, 238
mystery, 126, 221
mythos, 26, 29
narrativeness, 258, 260, 263. See also stories
Nash, Diane, xxvii
nationalist fundamentalism, 277
nativism, 277
natural gas, 147–50, 155

nature, 28–30

“nature takes no leaps” (Darwin), 92

Nazis, 202

Nebuchadnezzar, 188

negative capability, 221

negative fundamentalism: all-or-nothing character of, 35–39, 64, 272; characteristics of, xxiv, 35–36; in literary studies, 9–10, 246–47, 264, 275, 277, 279; positive vs., 9, 10; in religion, 279; skepticism contrasted with, 36

eoliberalism, 136, 138, 165

New Criticism, 251

Newman, John Henry, 204n38

New Republic (magazine), 94, 146

news, 124

Newsweek (magazine), 81

Newton, Isaac, 23, 25, 26, 86, 91, 215

Nietzsche, Friedrich, 9, 15, 202

nihilism, 9

Nixon, Richard, 122

nonadherents of fundamentalisms: contempt/disdain for, xxvii, 30–31, 33, 104–7; as evil, 23, 34, 64, 77, 83, 104, 105, 109; as ignorant, 23, 33–34, 86, 89, 93, 116, 274; as insane, 46, 89, 106, 274. See also adherents of fundamentalisms

Obama, Barack, 146, 155

ObamaCare, 162

objectivity, in Marxism-Leninism, 33–34, 78

Occupy Wall Street, 158

Oedipus, 29, 44

“on the whole and for the most part” (Aristotle), 59, 131, 175, 276

opinion: criticism as necessary element of, 100–101, 278; democracy based on, 84; dialogue based on, 55–56; negative views of, 54, 85; in novels, 111; positive views of, 55, 84; practical reasoning based on, 65; provisional nature of, 55, 84; in utopias, 110–11

originalism, in constitutional interpretation, 48n

Orwell, George, 119, 120; 1984

Packer, J. I., 15–16, 26, 37, 43–44

pandemic. See COVID-19 pandemic

paraphrase, richness of great texts not susceptible to, 72, 232, 233, 244–46, 263

particularity: in Bible stories, 206; history’s concern with, 60, 120, 258; the novel’s concern with, 71, 244, 265, 267; practical reasoning’s concern with, 61–63, 67, 131, 208, 219, 244, 267, 281–82

partisanship, 76, 123, 274

Pascal, Blaise, 222, 281n13
perception/experience, theories of, 40–41
perspective-taking, 207–12, 219–20, 243–44, 264–72. See also criticism
Peters, Tom, 143
Pierson, Arthur T., 31
Pigliucci, Massimo, 37
Plato, 9, 22, 202; Euthyphro, 34–35
Plekhanov, Georgi, 106–7
polarization. See divisiveness and polarization
politics: apocalypticism in, 280; Christian fundamentalism in, 81–82; complicity in, 81–83; contemporary context of, 64–65, 273–74, 288; domination of opponents as goal in, 273; fundamentalism in, 5–6, 16, 19–20, 77, 120–22, 274, 277; hatred in, 76–77, 80–81, 83, 109, 273–74, 287–88; literature seen through lens of, 253–56; reasoning appropriate for the domain of, 74; scientific claims made in, 86, 88, 90; trade-offs in, 281; vicious cycles of failure in, 5, 7, 82, 85–86. See also human affairs; partisanship
Pope, Alexander, Essay on Criticism, 200, 201
Popov, Vladimir, 173
Popper, Karl, 32, 278
positive fundamentalism, xxiv, 9–10, 64
postcolonialism, 265
Postman, Neil, 143–45, 176
posttruth, 141–42
potentiality, in literature, 232–35
poverty. See income inequality
practical reasoning: characteristics of, 59–60, 63, 65, 281–82; economics as domain for, 131, 175, 179–80; ethics as domain for, 58–70, 74, 281–82; novels as manifestation of, 65–71; politics as domain for, 63, 74; theoretical vs., 58–70. See also casuistry; morality; wisdom
prayer, 188, 230–31, 237
“preemptive epistemology,” 120
prejudice, 44, 46, 100, 112, 135, 186–88, 240
present: classic texts used for interpreting events in, 196, 198–99; hatred for, 125; interpretation of literature from the standpoint of, 235–36; narrativeness linked to salience of, 260–61; as only significant viewpoint, 2–3, 199–200, 206, 235–36
prices, 167–77
pride, 112, 116–17, 240
Prigogine, Ilya, 262
progressivism, 27, 92
propositions: falsifiability of scientific, 32, 90–92; geometric, 59; inappropriate uses of, 56, 226, 228, 244–45
protectionism, 160–61
Protestantism, 14, 43, 48, 193
Proust, Marcel, 2n
Proverbs, book of, 50, 213
psalms, 214
pseudoscience: and criminalization of “denialism,” 95–96; examples of, 27–30, 88; and extending claims beyond proper domain, 92; market fundamentalism as, 130; and politics, 92–93; science vs., 30, 37, 90–100, 258; Social Darwinism and Marxism as, 28, 92–94; and Soviet Marxism, 93; and spectrum of certainty, 91–92; and temptation to claim certainty, 90; and understanding science as block of equally well established claims, 90–95
Ptolemaic world view, 8
public goods, 129, 129n
Puritanism, 89
Pushkin, Aleksandr, 195, 198
Pythagorean theorem, 60, 63, 86
Qin Shi Huang, 198
quantum theory, 93

radical skepticism: possibility of knowledge questioned by, 9, 39, 44–45; practice as refutation of, 40–41
rationalism, 57–60, 281–82
reader reception theory, 235
reading, wisdom gained through experience of, 73, 246, 265, 267–68
realism: epistemological, 42; literary, 10, 65–73, 111–16, 240, 261, 266
reality, experience of, 39–44
reason. See knowledge/epistemology; practical reasoning; rationalism; theoretical reasoning
Reid, Thomas, 40–41
relativism: facts from perspective of, 37; fundamentalism compared to, 8–9, 36–38; standards challenged by, 179, 181–82, 187–88, 236–37
religion: apocalyptic scenarios based on, 2–3; dialogic approach to, 236; fundamentalism in, 8–9, 13–14, 16, 206, 274, 279; Hume’s critique of miracles and, 226–28; left-leaning fundamentalism in, 279; and meaning, 228–31, 236; moral tensions in, 189–94, 197, 202–12; science in relation to, 25–27, 215–26; standards in, 186–89; use and function of language in, 226–28, 234, 237–38

Republicans: attitudes of, 75–76, 140; and climate change, 153; Democrats’ views of, 75–76
resonance, chemical theory of, 93
“retarding friction” (Eliot), 68
revelation, 50–51
Revelation, book of, 37, 279
revolutionism, 35, 79–80, 104
“rhetoric of et cetera,” 250–51
Richardson, Samuel, 263
rights, 64, 236n
Riley, William B., 27
Roberts, Paul Craig, and Karen LaFollette, Meltdown, 168–74, 168n50
Robespierre, 80
Russian Formalism, 247
Russian literature, 195, 197–98, 232
Russian Orthodox Church, 232
Russian Revolution, 82
Rykov, Aleksei, 106
Ryzhkov, Nikolay, 171
“sanctity of human life,” 202
Sandburg, Carl, 235
Sanders, Bernie, 128, 140, 154–55
satire, 116–21, 128
Scalia, Antonin, 48n
scarce resources, 137–39, 145, 151, 156
Schapiro, Morton. See Morson, Gary Saul, and Morton Schapiro, Cents and Sensibility
Schiller, Robert, 257
Schneiderman, Eric, 95
Schweitzer, Albert, 203
science: and age of the earth, 221, 225–26; certainty in relation to, 90–92; COVID-19 pandemic and, 96–100; development/progress in, 90–92; economics modeled on,
INDEX 305

258; extension of, into other domains, 92–96, 224–25; falsification as criterion in, 32, 90–91, 278; foundational aspects of, 91; fundamentalist claims to, 23, 26–28, 30–32; and meaning, 216, 221–26, 228; misconceptions of, 90–92, 95–96; morality in relation to, 29, 215, 221–25; political claims to status of, 86, 88, 90; progress of, versus fundamental texts of, 51; reasoning process in, 91, 99; religion in relation to, 25–27, 215–26; secular fundamentalist texts claimed as, 50–51; social science modeled on, 23–25, 86–88, 92–93, 257–58; Soviet rejections of, 49, 93–94; teaching of, 91; as type of fundamentalism, 25–26; unity of, 25; viewed superstitiously, 91–92. See also pseudoscience

science education, 91
“science is real,” 92
Scopes Trial, 15
scripture. See Bible
secularization, 5
the self, 250–52, 265–72. See also literature
self-criticism, 109
self-deception, 113, 240
self-examination, xxvii, 204, 264
“self-fulfilling catastrophe.” See
politics: vicious cycles of failure in “semantic treasures” (Bakhtin), 233 “semantic values” (Bakhtin), 193 Shahnnameh, 264
Shakespeare, William, 22, 57, 195, 221, 233–34, 281
Shmelev, Nikolai, 173
silos, epistemological/experiential, 121–22, 128n93

Sim, Stuart, *Fundamentalist World*, 18–20
Sinyavsky, 49n91
Sivan, Emmanuel. See *Strong Religion*
“60-30-10” rule, 49
skepticism: Christian rejection of, 54; Erasmus’s praise of, 53–54; experience as basis for, 88; “foxes” as example of, 22, 44; negative fundamentalism contrasted with, 36; relativism contrasted with, 37n62. See also doubt; radical skepticism
“skepticism of the instrument” (Wells), 45
Skinner, B. F., 24
“the slide,” 82, 85–86, 96
Smith, Barbara Herrnstein, *Contingencies of Value*, 249–51, 253
social Darwinism, 27–28, 88, 92–93
“social-Darwinization,” 93
Social Democrats, 33, 104–5
Social Fascists, 33
socialism, 135–36, 259, 279
Socialist Workers’ Party, 140
“social physics” (Comte), 24, 86
social science: fundamentalist strains in, 89; science as model for, 23–25, 86–88, 92–93, 257–58

Socrates, 118
sola scriptura (scripture alone), 14
Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr, 120–21, 121n
Song of Songs, 214
Soros, George, *The Crisis of Global Capitalism*, 130–32, 140
soul, 211
Soviet Union: absolute conformity required by, 49, 77, 79, 89, 104, 108, 195; consequences of central planning in, 135, 167–74; and dialectical materialism, 29, 32, 42; fundamental texts of, 48–49; middle ground as target of attack in, xxv, 36; moral revaluation in, 202–3; rejections of science in, 49, 93–94; reversal of fortunes in, 78–79.

See also Lenin, V. I.; Marxism-Leninism

spectrum of certainty, 91–92

Spinoza, Baruch, 43, 46, 57

Squad, the (four female U.S. Representatives), 127


Stalin Constitution, 195

standards: changes in, 184–86, 236–38; clock parable about, 181–82, 200, 236; linguistic, 182–86; Marxist-Leninist (authoritarian), 32, 34; prejudicial use of, 186–88; religion as source of, 186–89; subjectivity/relativity as enemy of, 179, 181–82, 187–88, 236–37; truth as, 43

statistics, 143–45

Steinbeck, John, 235

Sterne, Laurence, *Tristram Shandy*, 118–20, 241

Stewart, Lyman and Milton, 13

Stiglitz, Joseph, 133, 144

stories: analytical and rhetorical role of, 145, 176–77, 244, 257–63; challenging nature of biblical, 189–94; role of, in economic thought, 145, 176–78, 257; role of the present in, 260–61

"strangeness of our condition" (Montaigne), 58

stream of consciousness, 267

*Strong Religion* (Almond, Appleby, and Sivan), 16, 21, 50

structuralism, 9

student loan debt, 162–64

Sudan, 16

superstition, 46

supplemental nutrition assistance program (SNAP), 159

Swift, Jonathan, 128

sympathy, 39, 266n32. See also compassion; empathy

*Tale of Genji*, 264

Talmud, 17, 48

Tamar, 189
taxes, 159–60, 165

Thales of Miletus, 25

theoretical reasoning: characteristics of, 59, 62–63; critique of, 117–20; ethics not a fitting domain for, 58–60, 62–64, 69, 281–82; practical vs., 58–70; rationalism's valorization of, 60
tolerance/intolerance, 56, 85, 99, 123


Torah, 17, 48, 50, 509n4, 211
totalitarianism, 4, 114–15, 122, 241

Toulmin, Stephen, 57–64, 224, 281

trade-offs, 136–37, 137n, 139–40, 145–49, 160, 281
trade policy, 160–61
tradition, as source of meaning, 46, 48, 124, 187, 192–93, 200–201, 210–13, 232, 237
translation, 52, 195–97, 201, 220–21, 237
Trisagon, 2–3
Trollope, Anthony: *He Knew He Was Right*, xxiv; *Phineas Finn*, 261; *The Way We Live Now*, xxiv
Trotsky, Leon, 6, 106, 202, 278
Trump, Donald, 76, 80–81, 127, 128, 137n, 141, 153
truth: Christian fundamentalist view of, 39, 43–44, 46; criticism as means of seeking, 100–103; dialogue as means to, 56; failures and hindrances in recognizing, 33–34, 45–47; in novels, 72; perspicuity of, 39–47. See also certainty; knowledge/epistemology
Tugwell, Rexford, 167–68
Turgenev, Ivan, 35, 113, 262; *Fathers and Children*, 114, 241, 262
Turkey, 16
twins, 219
“tyranny of principles” (Toulmin), 59

uncertainty. See complexity and uncertainty
University of Chicago Divinity School, 14
U.S. Constitution, 47–48n90, 194–95, 197, 236n
us vs. them mentality, xxiv, 77, 127–28. See also all-or-nothing mentality; evil
utilitarianism, 119, 187, 241
utopias, 24, 27, 110–11, 113, 120, 240–41, 274, 279
Valentinov, Nikolay, 104, 106–7
Verginaud, Pierre, 80
violence: in fundamentalists’ response to others, 19, 104–5; not a necessary aspect of fundamentalism, 21–22; as outcome of fundamentalist extremism, 114–15
Virgil, *The Aeneid*, 263–64
Wall Street Journal, xxiii
Washington consensus, 133
WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) values, 204
Wells, H. G., 45
Wetter, Gustav, 42
Whitehouse, Sheldon, 95–96
“Who Whom?” (Lenin), 256
Wilson, Edward O., 24–26, 31
wisdom, 50, 69, 73, 113, 213, 236
Wolfe, Thomas, 235
world literature, 263–65
World War I, 14–15
Yew, Lee Kuan, 131, 205
Yezhov, Nikolai, 207
Zakaria, Fareed, 155
Zero Population Growth, 94
zero-sum games, xxiv, 105, 108
Zijderfeld, Anton, 21n26, 36
Zuckerberg, Mark, xxiii