

Report from the Center for

# PHILOSOPHY & PUBLIC POLICY

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## Faith in Science

To make its research readily available to a broad audience, the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy publishes a quarterly newsletter: *QQ—Report from the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy*. Named after the abbreviation for “questions,” *QQ* summarizes and supplements Center books and working papers and features other selected work on public policy questions. Articles in *QQ* are intended to advance philosophically informed debate on current policy choices; the views presented are not necessarily those of the Center or its sponsors.

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America is in love with scientists. The personal prestige of research scientists is high, and science consistently ranks toward the top of the list in polls surveying the esteem in which we hold various institutions (with government consistently trailing behind). The Apollo space program remains, for many, the crowning American achievement, the standard of success against which other aspects of American life are judged—and found wanting. (As in: “If they can put a man on the moon, why can’t they fix the potholes on my street?”)

We tend not to blame scientists and engineers for the social and environmental problems that are the by-products of new technologies. Instead, we rely on the scientific community to tell us what the problems are and what can be done to remedy or prevent them. Increasingly the most pressing contemporary problems seem irreducibly technical and scientific. What should we do about acid rain? The answer depends on what combination of pollutants can be pinpointed as its cause. What technological advance can prevent future industrial disasters like the one in Bhopal or future famines like the one in Ethiopia? Even the most urgent question of all, how to avoid nuclear war, is seen to be scientific at its core. Are strategic defenses technologically feasible? How bad would nuclear winter be? What do the weapons do, and what will be left after they have done it?—technical questions all.

We have an extraordinary faith that science can provide the needed answers, due, perhaps, to a picture