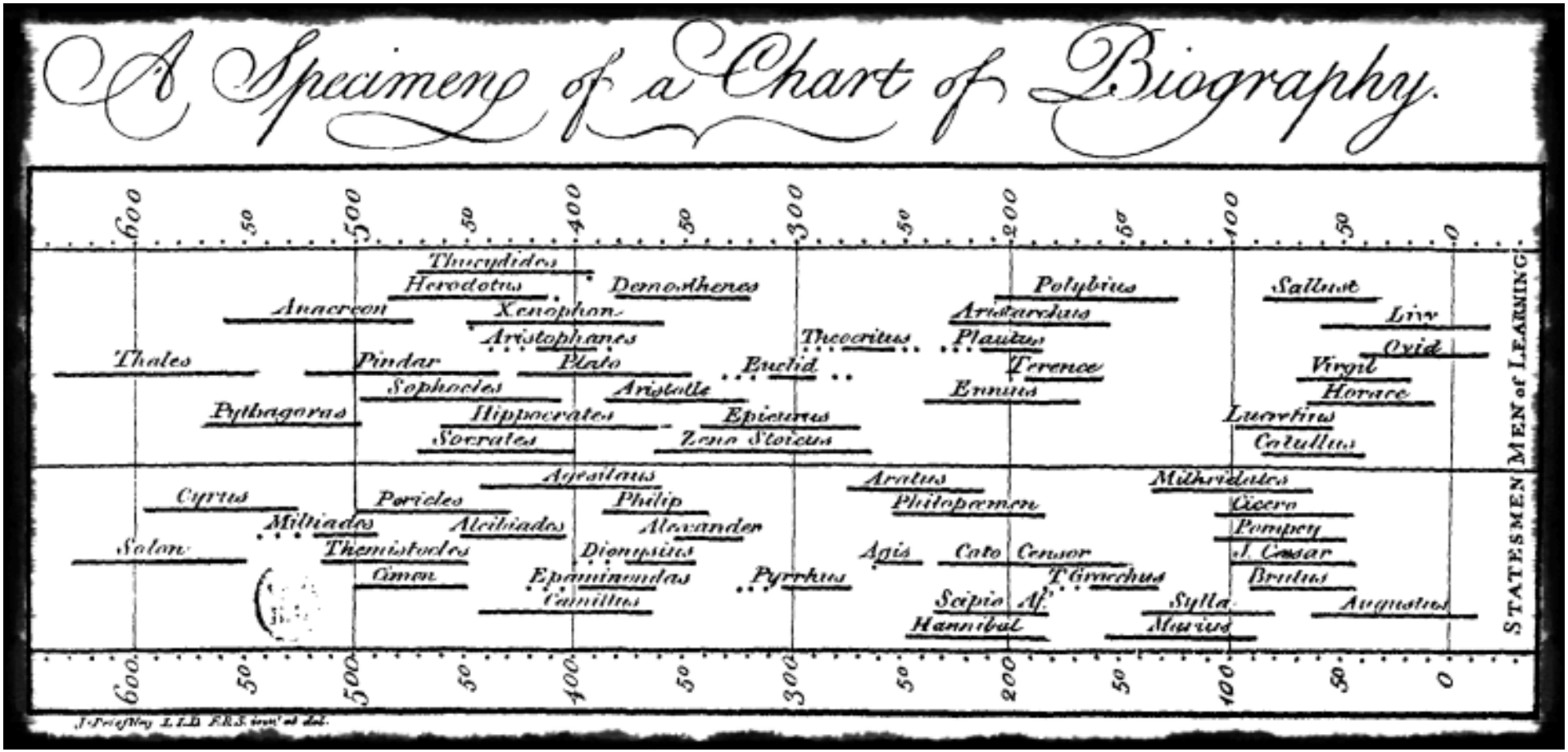
Data Before the Fact

Daniel Rosenberg, 2012

Is Data modern?

Joseph Priestly : Refers to historical facts as ‘Data’.



The Chart of Biography by Joseph Priestly, 1772

“What are facts? Are they incontrovertible data that simply demonstrate what is true? Or are they bits of evidence marshaled to persuade others of the theory one sets out with?”

- Mary Poovey's landmark book, *A History of the Modern Fact.*

Above all, it is crucial to observe that the term “data” serves a different rhetorical and conceptual function than do sister terms such as “facts” and “evidence.” To put it more precisely, in contrast to these other terms, the semantic function of data is *specifically* rhetorical.

Facts are ontological, evidence is epistemological, data is rhetorical.

In the 17th Century,

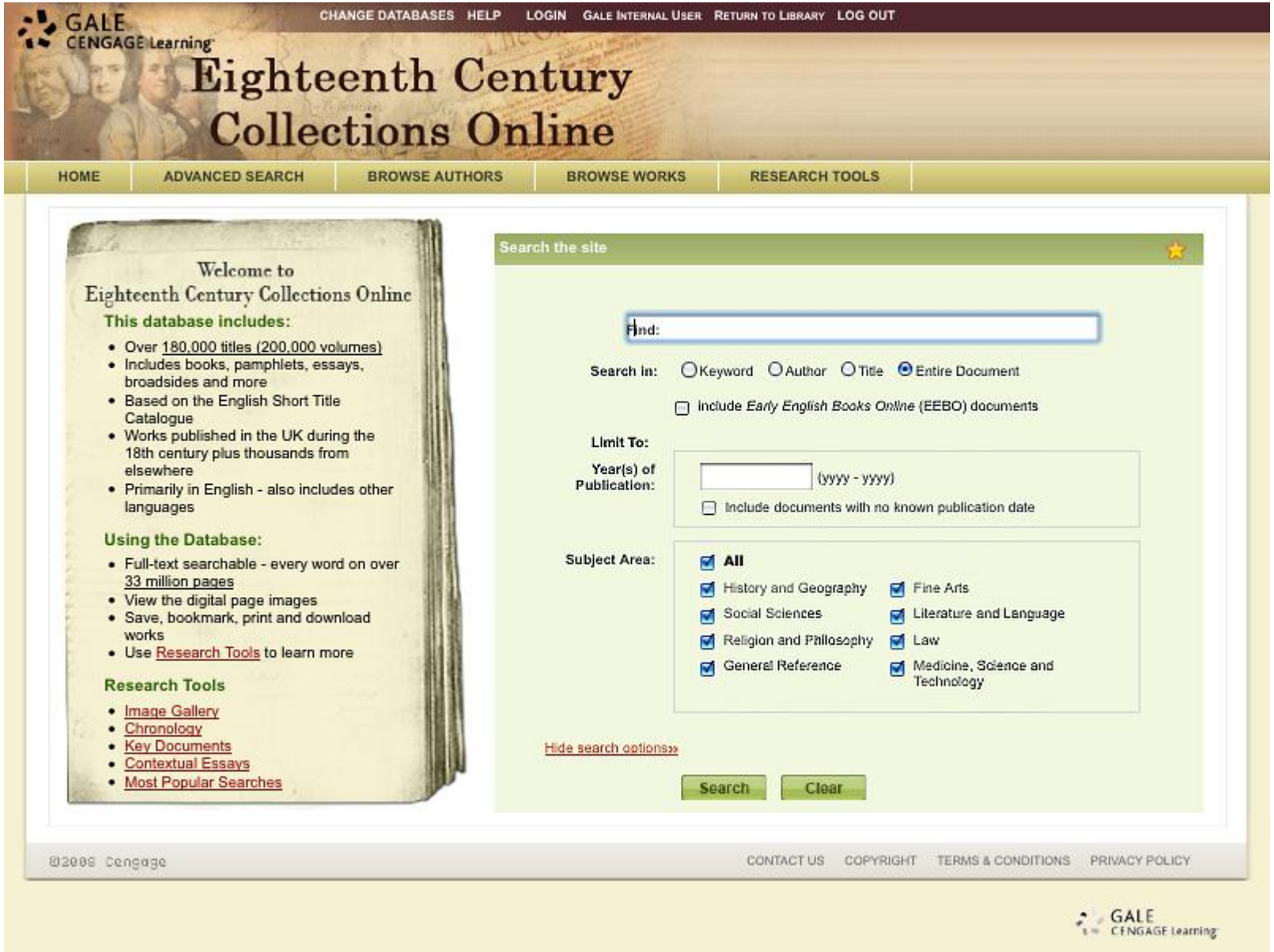
Mathematical data: Given quantities; X=3

Theological data: Scriptural truths, principles or facts, given by God and not susceptible to questioning

Google books Ngram Viewer

Graph these comma-separated phrases: Data case-insensitive

between 1700 and 2008 from the corpus English with smoothing of 0 . Search lots of books


GALE CENGAGE Learning
CHANGE DATABASES HELP LOGIN GALE INTERNAL USER RETURN TO LIBRARY LOG OUT
Eighteenth Century Collections Online
HOME
ADVANCED SEARCH
BROWSE AUTHORS
BROWSE WORKS
RESEARCH TOOLS
Welcome to Eighteenth Century Collections Online
This database includes:
Over 180,000 titles (200,000 volumes)
Includes books, pamphlets, essays, broadsides and more
Based on the English Short Title Catalogue
Works published in the UK during the 18th century plus thousands from elsewhere
Primarily in English - also includes other languages
Using the Database:
Full-text searchable - every word on over 33 million pages
View the digital page images
Save, bookmark, print and download works
Use Research Tools to learn more
Research Tools
Image Gallery
Chronology
Key Documents
Contextual Essays
Most Popular Searches
Search the site
Find:
Search in: Keyword Author Title Entire Document
Include Early English Books Online (EEBO) documents
Limit To:
Year(s) of Publication:
(yyyy - yyyy)
Include documents with no known publication date
Subject Area:
All
History and Geography
Fine Arts
Social Sciences
Literature and Language
Religion and Philosophy
Law
General Reference
Medicine, Science and Technology
Hide search options»
Search
Clear
©2009 Cengage
CONTACT US COPYRIGHT TERMS & CONDITIONS PRIVACY POLICY
GALE CENGAGE Learning

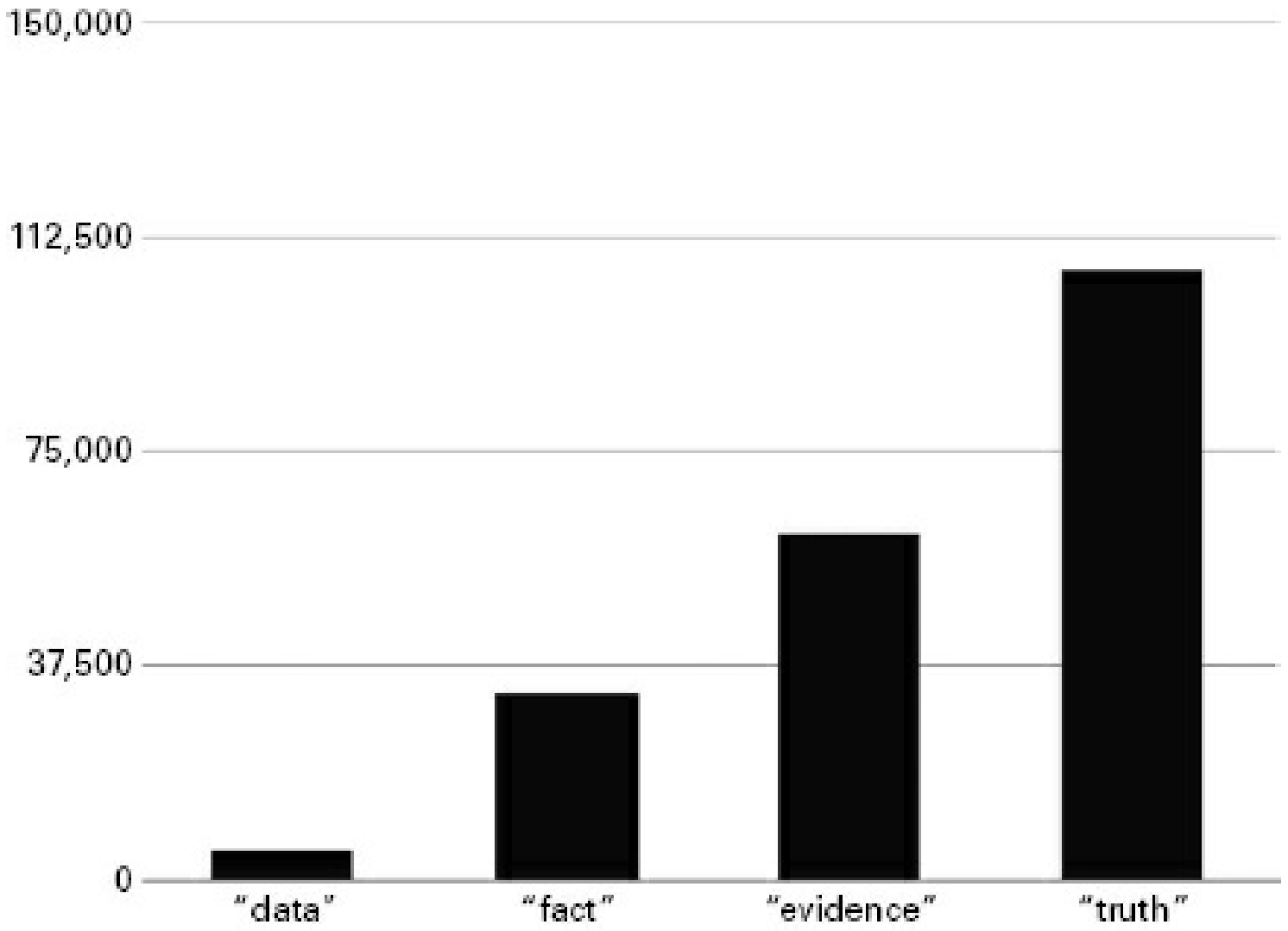


Figure 1.9
Works in the ECCO I corpus containing "data," "fact," "truth," and "evidence," 1701–1800.

Four Preliminary results of the study

1. The word “data” entered the English language in the seventeenth century and was naturalized in the eighteenth.

2. The term “data” came into English principally through discussions of mathematics and theology, roughly 70 percent of instances. At century's end, mathematics and religion accounted for only about 20 percent of total instances, which were now dominated by empirical contexts such as those of medicine, finance, natural history, and geography.

3. At the beginning of the century, “data” was especially used to refer either to principles accepted as a basis of argument or to facts gleaned from scripture that were unavailable to questioning. By the end of the century, the term was most commonly used to refer to facts in evidence determined by experiment, experience, or collection. It had become usual to think of data as the result of an investigation rather than its premise.

4. The *OED* is right and Google is wrong. Or at the very least, Google is not yet particularly helpful on this question. There are definitive quantifiable trends in both the occurrence and usage of the term “data” in the eighteenth century. It took some fairly heavy work with the ECCO data to make these trends visible, but having done it, it is clear that the *Oxford English Dictionary* account of the history of the term is mirrored in the quantitative results.

From the beginning, data was a rhetorical concept. Data means—and has meant for a very long time—that which is given prior to argument.