



# Theodicy: Problem of Evil

Chick Keller  
Los Alamos Faith and Science Forum  
6/17/2020

A woman wearing a dark, heavy, hooded cloak is shown from the chest up. She is looking upwards and to the right with a serious expression. The background is a dark, misty forest with bare trees, creating a somber and mysterious atmosphere.

# Introduction

- One of the most troubling aspects of belief in God is the existence of evil.
- **Here we define evil as anything that harms or pains individuals.**
- Evil can be caused either by humans or nature (slaughter, torture, or earthquakes, floods, etc.)
- The basic question is: How can an all-loving Creator allow great evil?
- The conclusion many have come to is that the existence of great evil means there is not an all-loving Creator.
- **THEODICY** is the term that discusses this conundrum

# Significance

- The existence of evil in the world, in the view of Raymond Lam,
- "presents the gravest challenge to the existence of an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving God."

# *Two Types of Theodicy Arguments*

- **Logical**

- If an **omnipotent, omnibenevolent and omniscient** god exists, then **evil** does not.
- There is evil in the world.
- Therefore, an omnipotent, omnibenevolent and omniscient god **does not exist**.

- **Evidential**

- There are evidences of **intense suffering** which an omnipotent being could have prevented without losing some greater good.
- A wholly good being **would prevent these**.
- (Therefore) There **does not exist** an omnipotent, omniscient wholly good being.

# Logical Theodicy

- *Epicurus quote:*
- "Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent.
- Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent.
- Is he both able and willing? Then from whence comes evil?"

# Many Ideas and Reasonings.

None is very satisfying

- Cruciform Theodicy
- Skeptical theism defense
- After Life
- Denial
- Absence of good (Privation Theory)
- Hidden Reasons
- Karma

## A perennial Problem through the Ages

- With no "definitive answer" to the theodicy question,
- "debates about theodicy continue among believers and unbelievers alike," observes Robert F. Brown.
- Therefore, Brown adds, "theodicy remains a **perennial concern** for thoughtful religious commitment." This is because, Brown reports: "how the divine can be compatible with the existence of evil in the world has perplexed profound thinkers and ordinary people right down to the present day."

# Benefits of Evil?

- Through the ages we have seen great love and heroism come from people subjected to evil. Sort of making lemonade when you get lemons. Is this part of God's plan? Is evil a goad to make us better?
- On the other hand our basic instincts make it hard to forgive wrongs especially really horrible ones. The downside of evil, we get worse.



# A hint of an Answer

- God has given a kind of **freedom to creation** to become what it wants.
- The Creator doesn't need to “nudge” creation very much if at all.
- Instead, **having built into it the guides** that will cause it to **ultimately arrive at the Creator's purposes**, it is allowed to proceed on its own novel development.
- Some of this development causes pain to creatures, because its directions **can lead to more or less suffering**.
- This is called **Process Theology**

# John Polkinghorne

## Quantum Physicist and Anglican Minister

- “Now, if the physical world surprises us and is different from everyday expectation — common sense, if you like — it wouldn’t be very odd, really, would it be, if God also turned out to be rather surprising?”
- Things that are just on the surface, easy to believe, are not the whole story. There’s a deeper, stranger, and more satisfying story to be found, both in science and in religion.”
- “Does our world with all its strange and unexpected chaos seem like it’s been carefully planned?”

Process Theology suggests the Creator, while knowing everything in existence, doesn't know in detail the future because it hasn't happened yet.

This seems **against** established Christian beliefs, but it does **explain what we see**.

Further, while we want to give the Creator omniscience even of the future, what if the Creator doesn't want it? Who are we to say it has to be?

The freedom given to creation means that the Creator can't intervene and so **becomes in a sense a changing, victim**, somewhat as we are.

**Ian Barbour** points out, process affirms " God of **persuasion** rather than **compulsion** who influences the world without determining it" **God has set aside the ability to coerce**, retaining only the ability to persuade.

# Two Alternatives

- We seem to be left with these two conclusions:
  - Various but inadequate Theodicy explanations
  - Diminishing God's power
- Perhaps a third approach?

# Jonathan Sacks' Reasoning

- He goes through Genesis and shows that the patriarchs all questioned God, protested evil, harm, injustice.
- He says the Jewish culture has been ever thus.
- “They don’t look at the world as it is. They look for one it could be!”
- They **take action** to remedy these evils.
- That’s why so many are: lawyers fighting injustice, economists fighting poverty, doctors and medical researchers fighting disease, and teachers and academics fighting ignorance.”
  - **The Great Partnership, Jonathan Sacks**

From Bobby Kennedy's Funeral Address  
for  
Jack Kennedy

“Some men see things as they are and say  
‘why?’

I dream things that never were and say  
‘why not’”

This type of thinking leads to perhaps  
**another way of looking at Evil.**

Don't just notice it, do something about it. And  
apparently that's what we have done!

- And let's look at the record over the past, say, two hundred years.
- **Almost all evil has gotten less!** Humans are making a difference!
- The following slides from Pinker's youtube TED talk, which Morrie Pongratz showed a few weeks ago will show this.

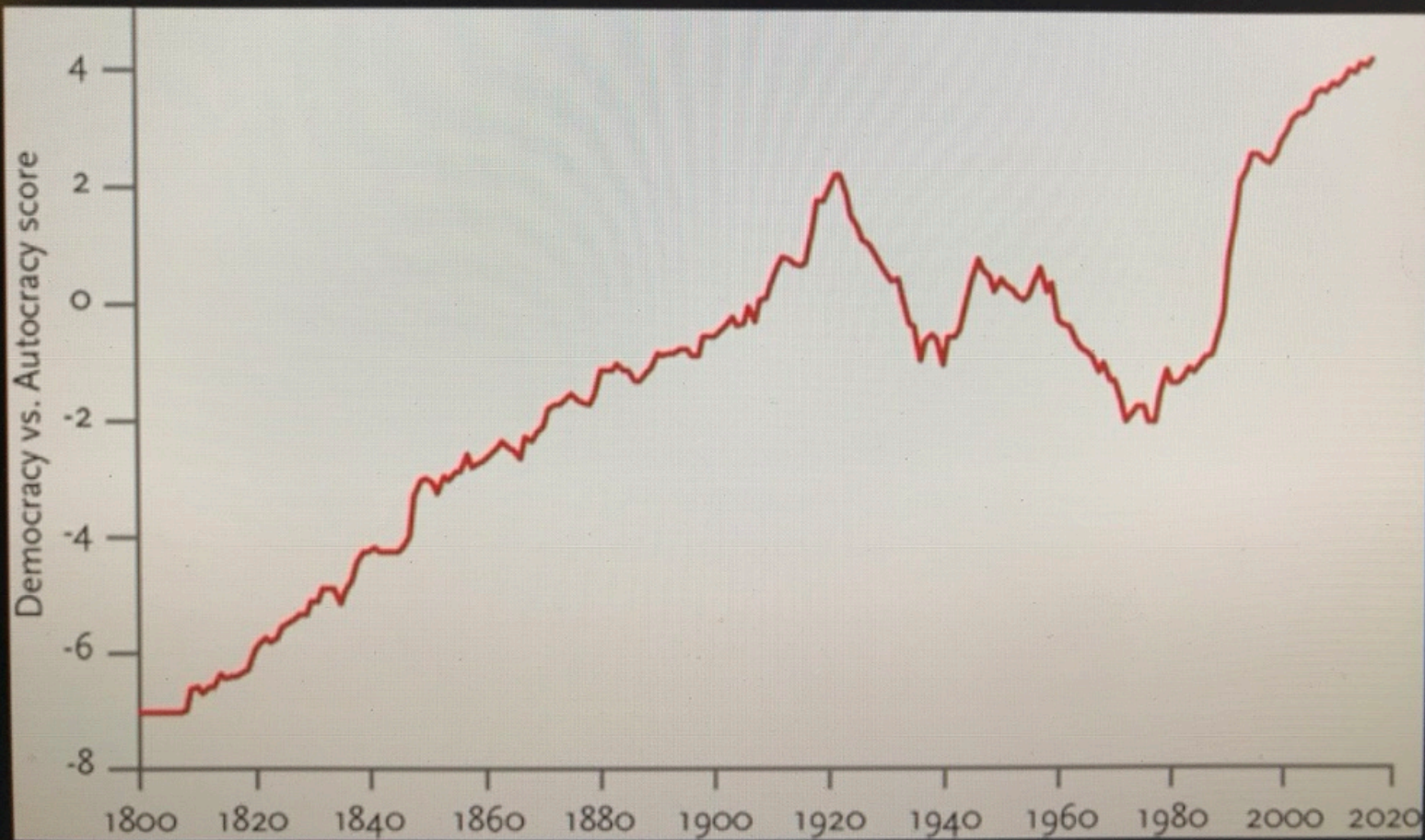
# Progress: A Testable Hypothesis

- Life
- Health
- Sustenance
- Prosperity
- Peace
- Freedom
- Safety
- Knowledge
- Leisure
- Happiness



# Democracy vs. Autocracy, 1800-2015

Watch later



18:32

Source: HumanProgress, based on Polity IV

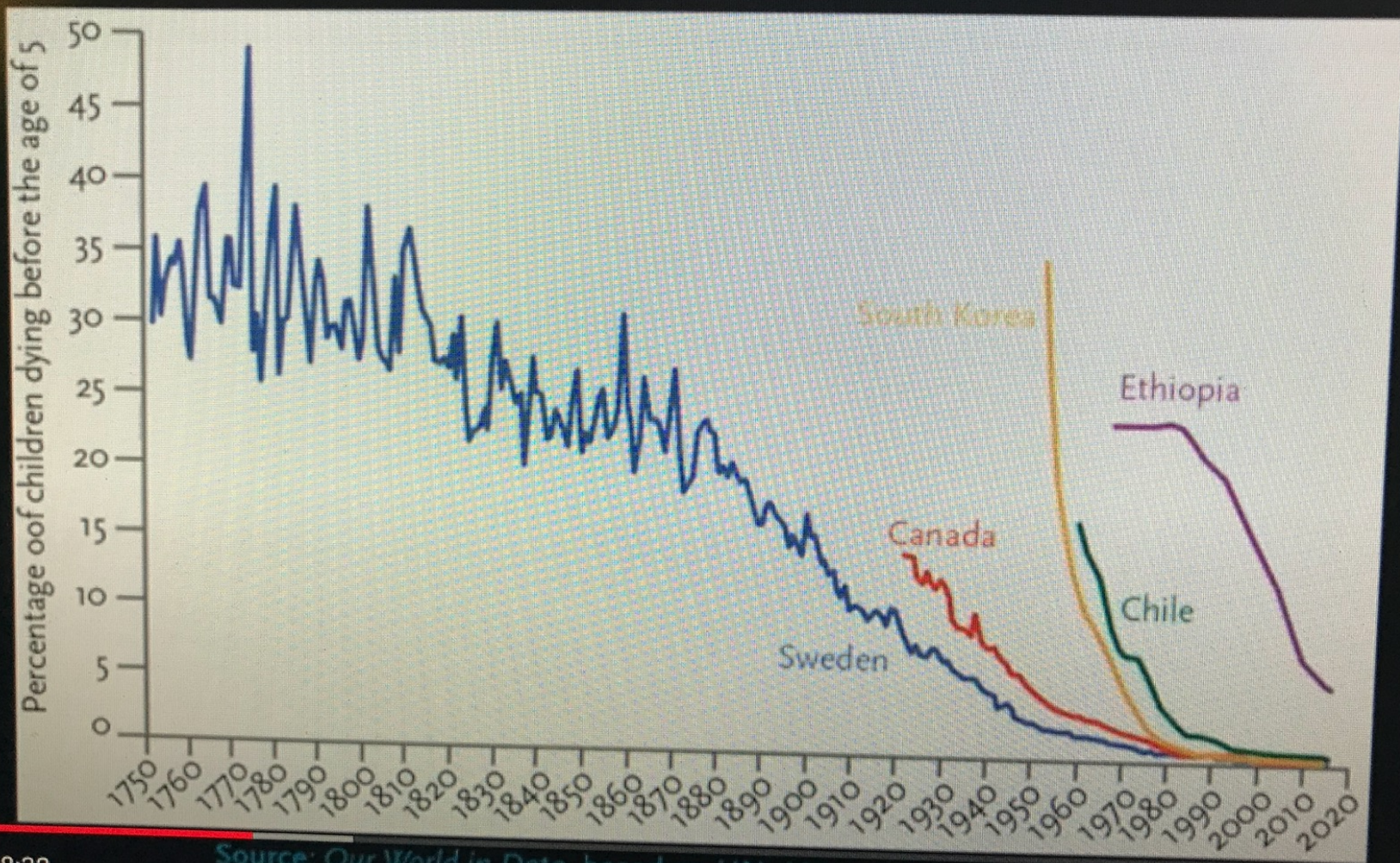
CC



# Child Mortality, 1751-2015

Watch later

Share

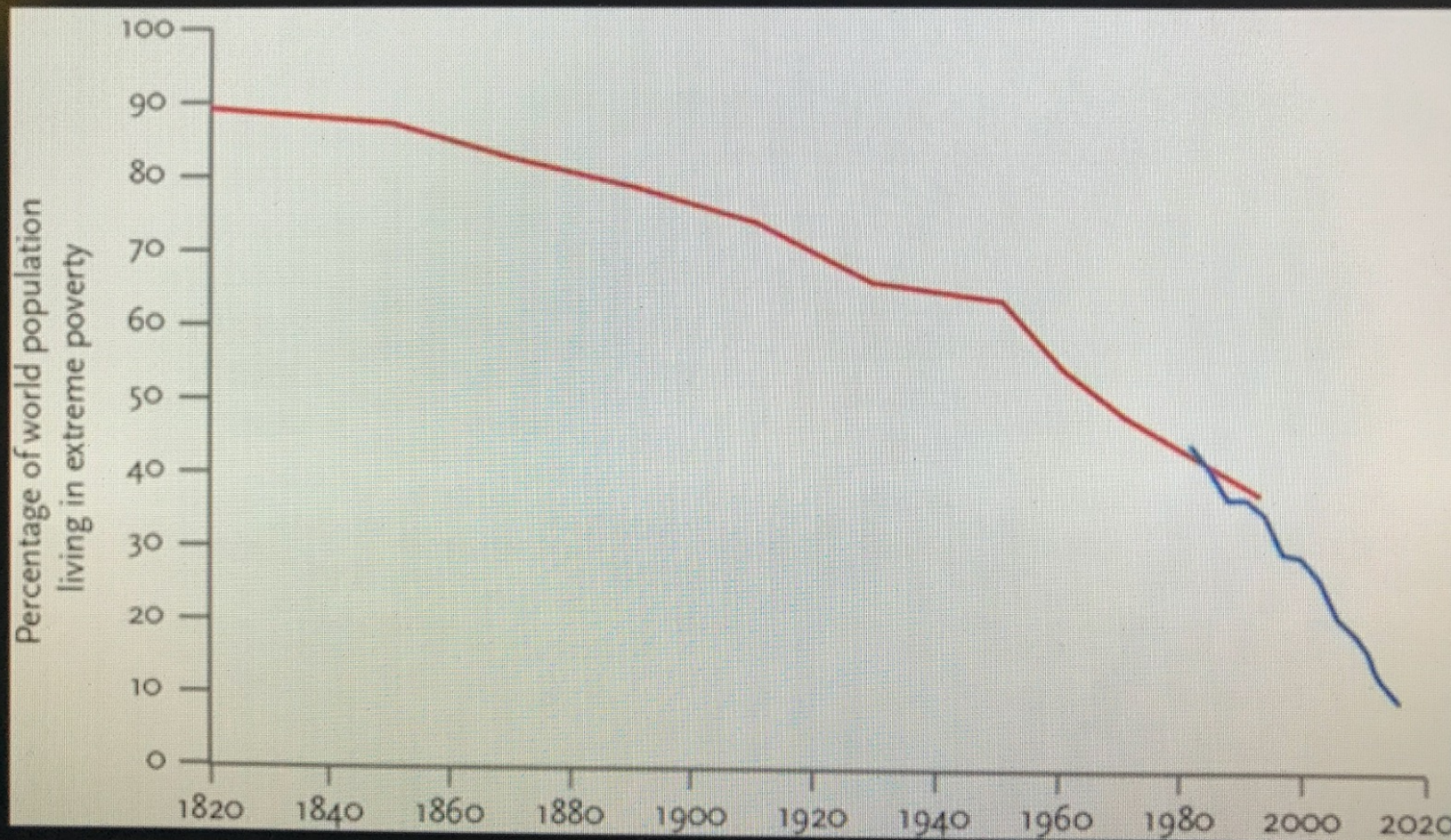


5:09 / 18:32

Source: Our World in Data, based on UN: Human Mortality Database

# Extreme Poverty, 1820-2015

Watch later



he world getting better or worse? A look at the numbers | Steven Pinker

## Natural Disaster Deaths, 1900-2015

Watch later

Share



7:15 / 18:32

Source: Our World in Data, based on EM-DAT, The International Disaster Databases



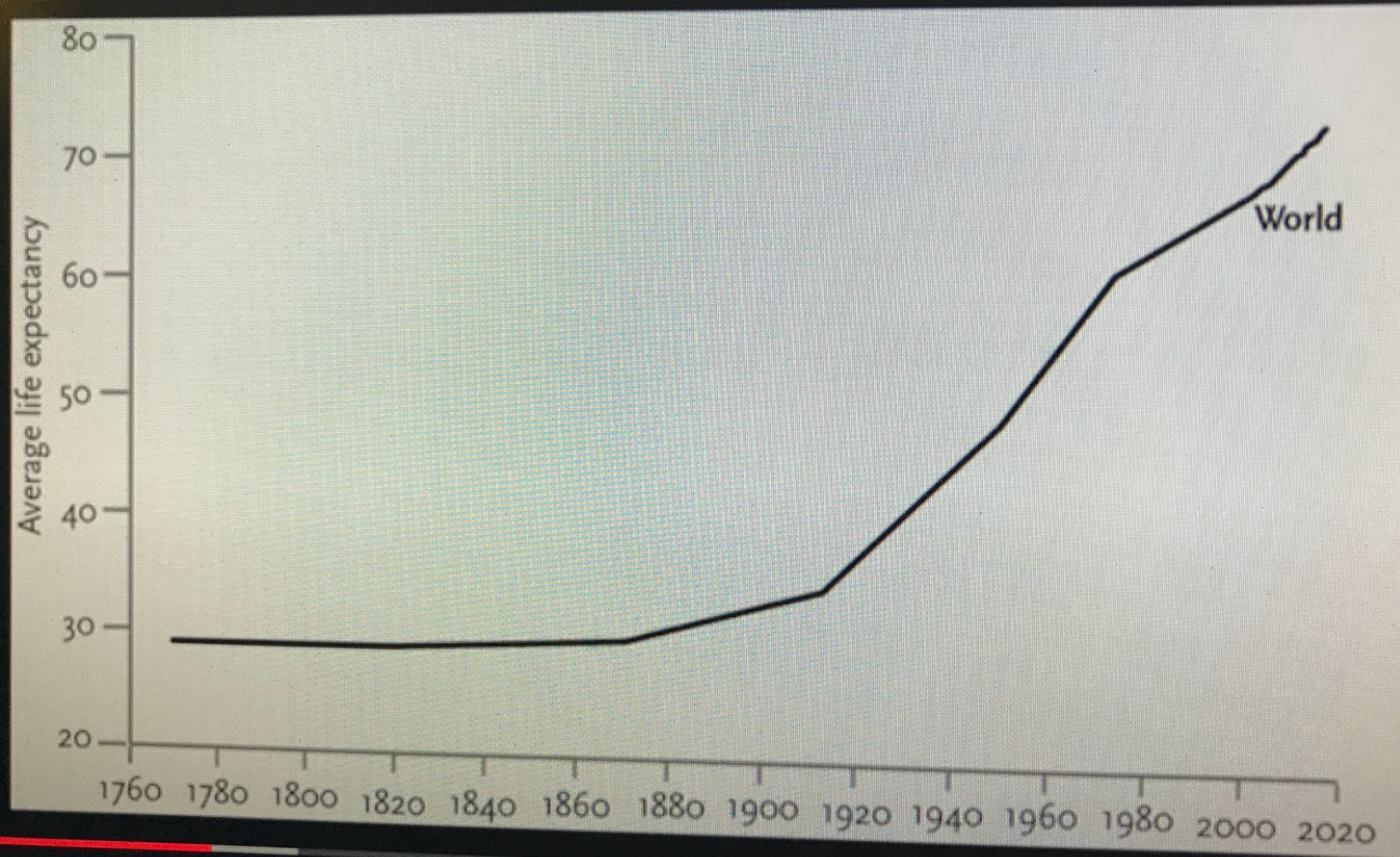
YouTube

getting better or worse? A look at the numbers | Steven Pinker

# Life Expectancy, 1771-2015

Watch later

S



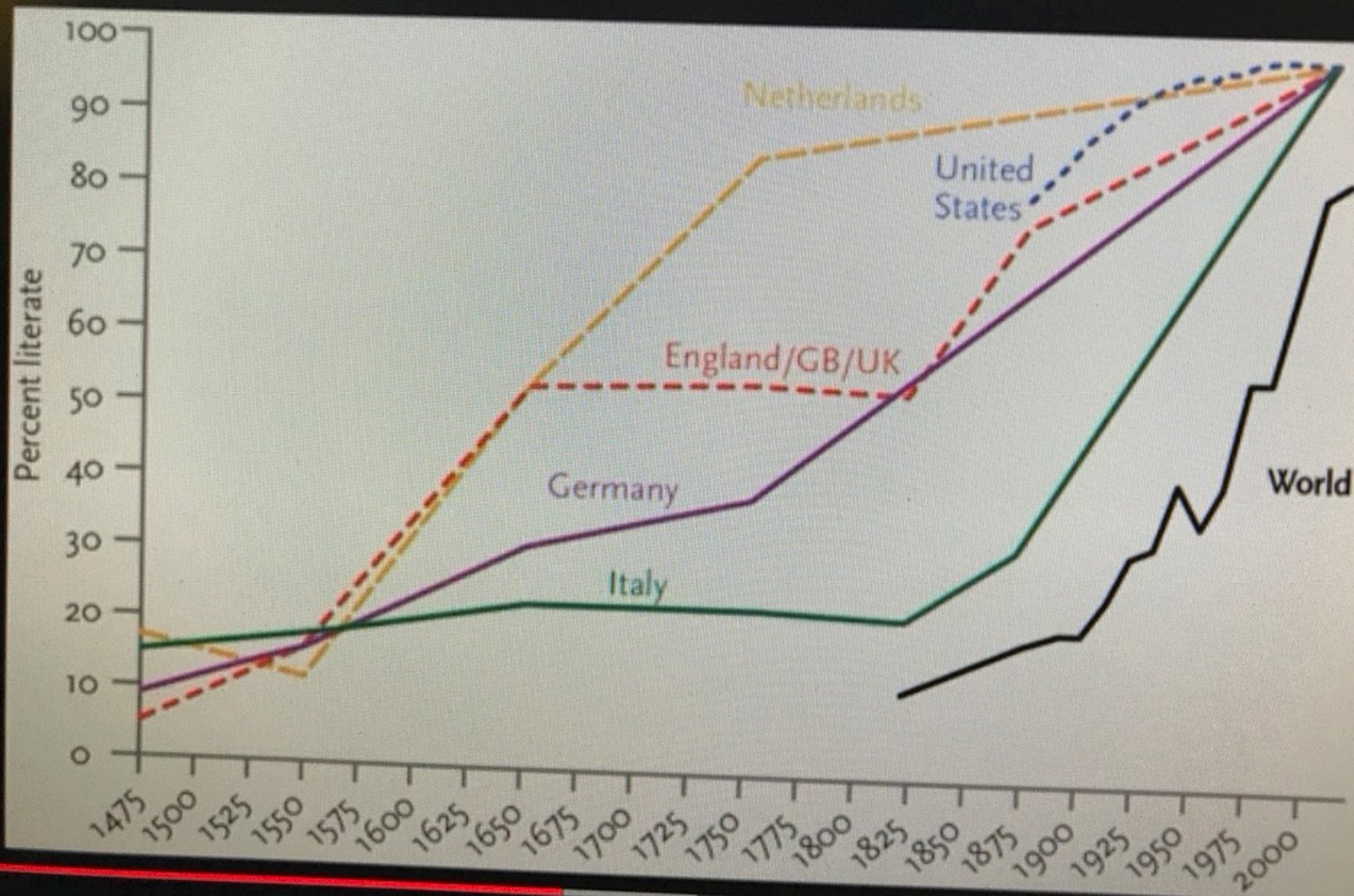
9 / 18:32

Source: Our World in Data, based on Riley 2000; WHO; World Bank



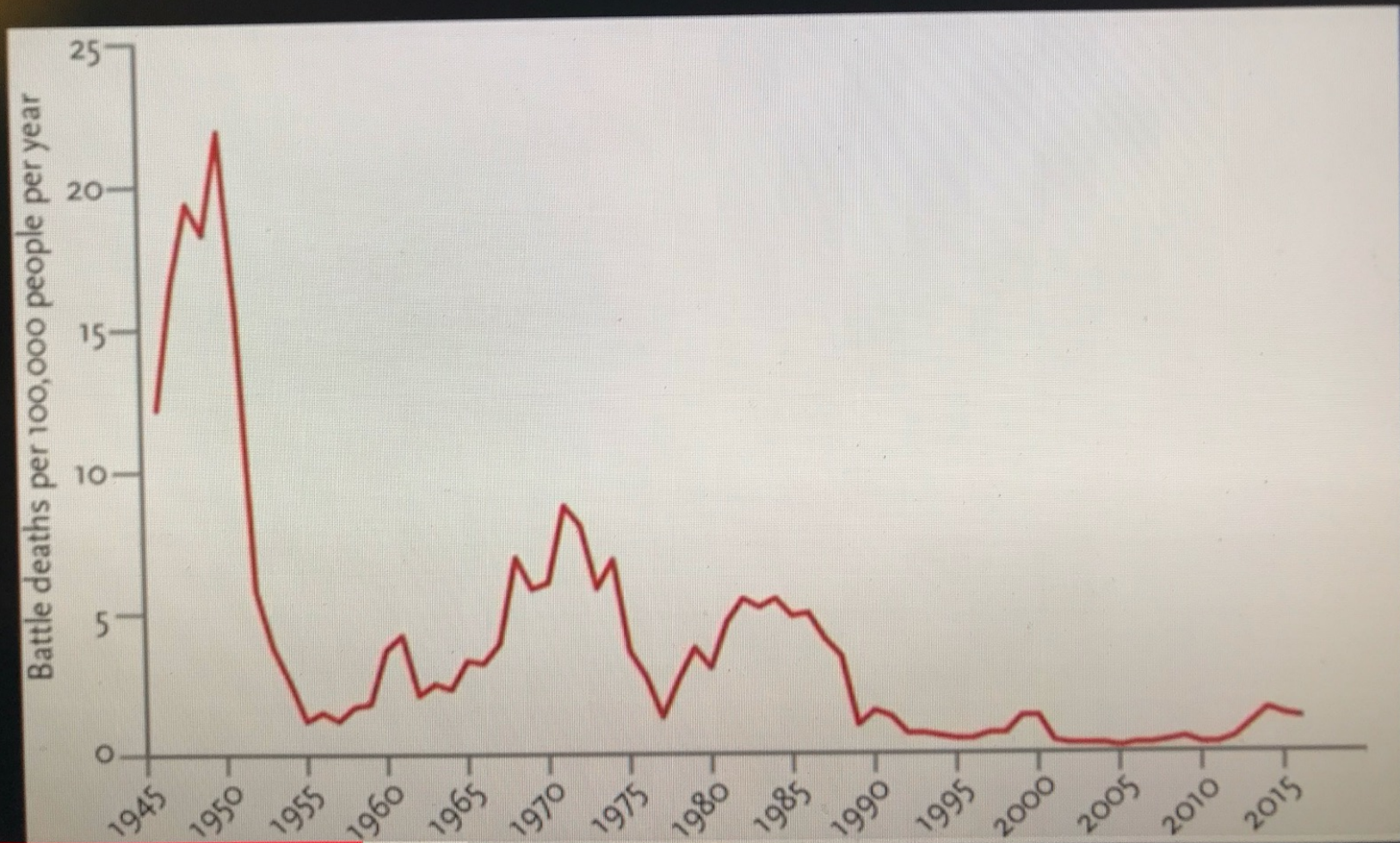
# Literacy, 1475-2010

Watch la



# Battle Deaths, 1946-2016

Watch later

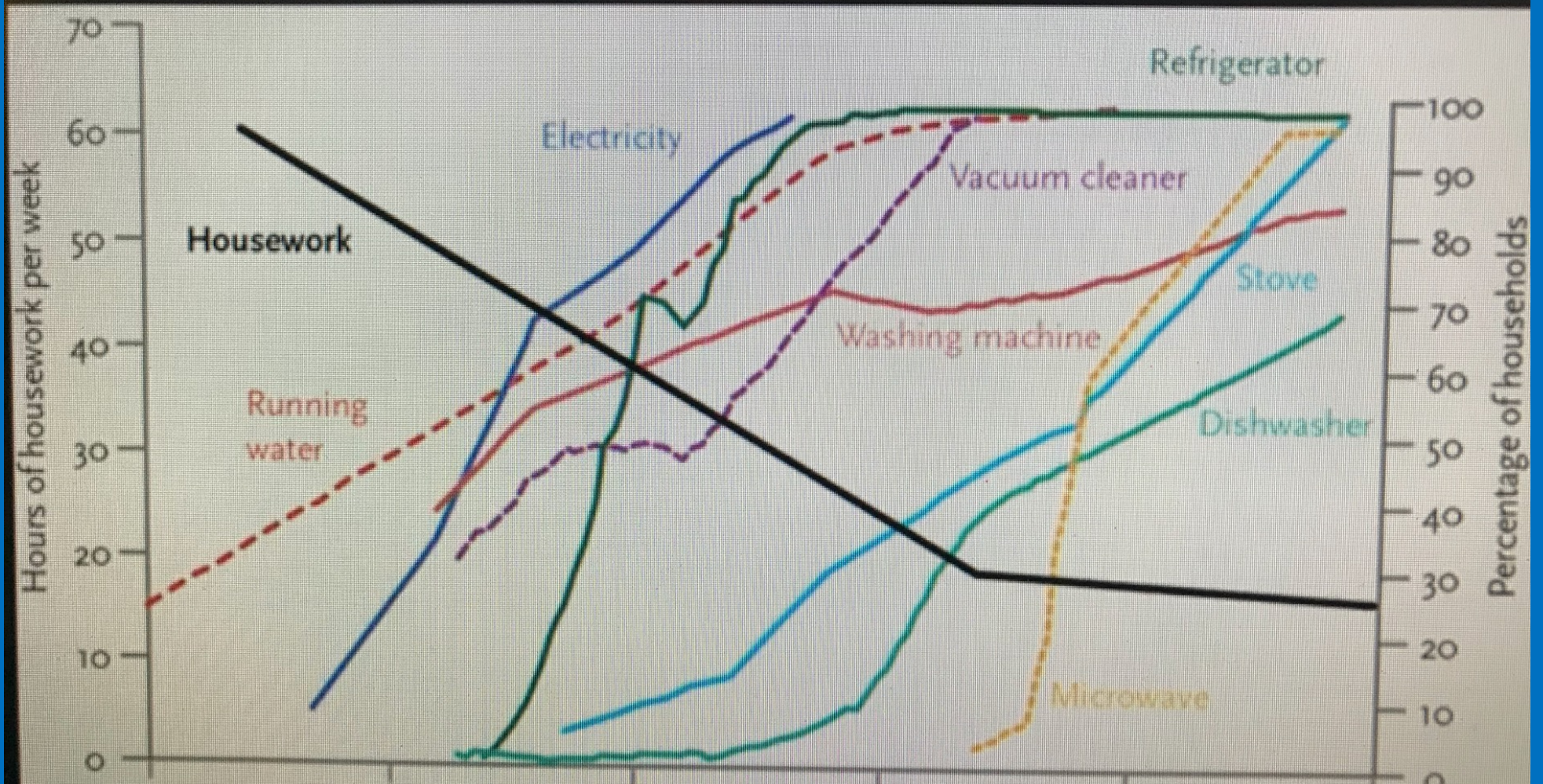


0 / 18:22

Source: Peace Research Institute of Oslo; Uppsala Data Conflict Project



# 1900-2015





# Everywhere you look it's better

- Pinker shows many similar graphs all about the human response to evil and all showing marked improvement.
- **Justice**—Bill of Rights, fair labor practices, racial equality
- **Disease**—no more small pox, polio, cycle cell anemia, greatly reduced other diseases such as cancers.
- **Failures in the human body**—heart, blood pressure, clogged arteries, organ transplant. digestive tract, muscles, etc.
- Enormous decline in **physical violence**

# How Has This Happened?

- Why would humanity continue to reduce Evil?

One general reason is that killing and torture are **not as profitable** as capitalism/trade/business.

Globalization also has reduced the **tribal we/they concept**

- But another is that humans have assimilated the tenets of religions into their culture so that, **whether or not they are believers**, they subscribe to those tenets. And it's religion that seeks to reduce evil.

# What if Evil Becomes minimal?

- With the continued and increasing advances in medicine it is not unlikely that illness will be minimal within the next 80 years.
- Religions in large part deal with alleviating suffering, poverty, etc.
- But by the beginning of the next century what will be their function?

# Possibility of Great Evils in the Future

- Humankind's largest problem is arguably its **over-population**. We are more than 7 billion and are projected to increase to 9 billion.
- This puts an enormous strain on the Earth's resources.
- It also exacerbates global problems like Climate Change.
- In some of our talks this summer we will worry about the ascendance of robots, artificial Intelligence, genetic modification of living things.  
You can probably think of other global problems that would cause great social upheavals

# Role of Religion

- As it has done for thousands of years, religions have interposed their ideas to modify actions of humans.
- In future believers will have a great role in making sure humankind does indeed prosper and make what I will call “non-evil” decisions.
- It seems inescapable that religion and science must work together

# A Biblical Take

- Recall the rich young man who came to Jesus. He had already done all that the Law required, and he asked what **more** should he do. Jesus told him to sell everything, give it to the poor and follow him.
- Examining this more closely we might discover something about how the Creator designed the world.
- **Perhaps evil is there for us to work to get rid of it!**
- Give to the poor, yes, but by following Christ we are to work to reduce evil.
- Much of this can be done by learning more about creation.
- **As scientists we seem to have a sacred calling!**

# But

- What about Pain and Suffering  
In the animal kingdom?

# Humans Cause Much of Animal Suffering and/or Extinction

- Such a simple thing as house cat pets allowed to roam outside.
  - These kill **hundreds of millions of birds** in the US every year!
- Aphrodesiacs from Rhinoceros horns
  - Causing extinction of White Rhinos
- Coral Reef death
  - One of the most diverse habitats on the planet
- Habitat Destruction
  - Largest cause of extinctions



Before



After



## Are Humans Morally Culpable?

- **Scriptures seldom dealt** with humans destroying the environment largely because there weren't enough of them to do so in any global scale.
  - (Perhaps a lesson from Noah and his ark?)
- So the idea that destroying the Creator's world in all its diversity would be a sin is **not well thought out**.
- Many humans, however, think it is and work hard to preserve it.
- **Science is telling** us how interrelated all things are and showing us the costs of ignoring this.
- **Do you think it is sinful to destroy God's creation?**

# This Sums It Up

## How we have treated God's creation

- “We may have had some intuition **that it *was* a binge** and the earth couldn't support it, but aside from the easy things (biodegradable detergent, slightly smaller cars), we didn't do much.
- **We didn't turn our lives around to prevent it.** Our sadness is almost an aesthetic response—appropriate because we have marred a great, mad, profligate work of art, **taken a hammer to the most perfectly proportioned of sculptures.** “
- **The End of Nature, Bill McKibben**

## Problem of Innocent Animal Suffering

- While it can be asserted that bad things happen to humans because of their guilt or because it is the downside of free will,
- Neither of these arguments pertains to animals.



The biggest number of winter ticks that Peter J. Pekins ever found on a moose was about 100,000. But that moose calf was already dead, most likely the victim of anemia, which develops when that many ticks drain a moose's blood.



For this reason, parasites are regularly associated with lower survival, reproduction, and movement in their hosts



Another you'd not want to meet but animals do





It those weren't enough!



*C. hominivorax* larvae dive head-first into whatever food source is nearest, and burrow deeper, **eating into live flesh if available**. This results in a pocket-like lesion that causes severe pain to the host.



# 10 deadly parasites

- The zombie wasp
- The tongue-eating sea louse
- The eye-inflating worm
- The dragon worm
- The head-splitting fungus
- The sex-change bacteria
- The mind-control bug
- The womb-hijacking barnacles
- Zombie wasp
- Vampire fish

Thus we end on something  
Theodicy doesn't seem to be able to  
Explain

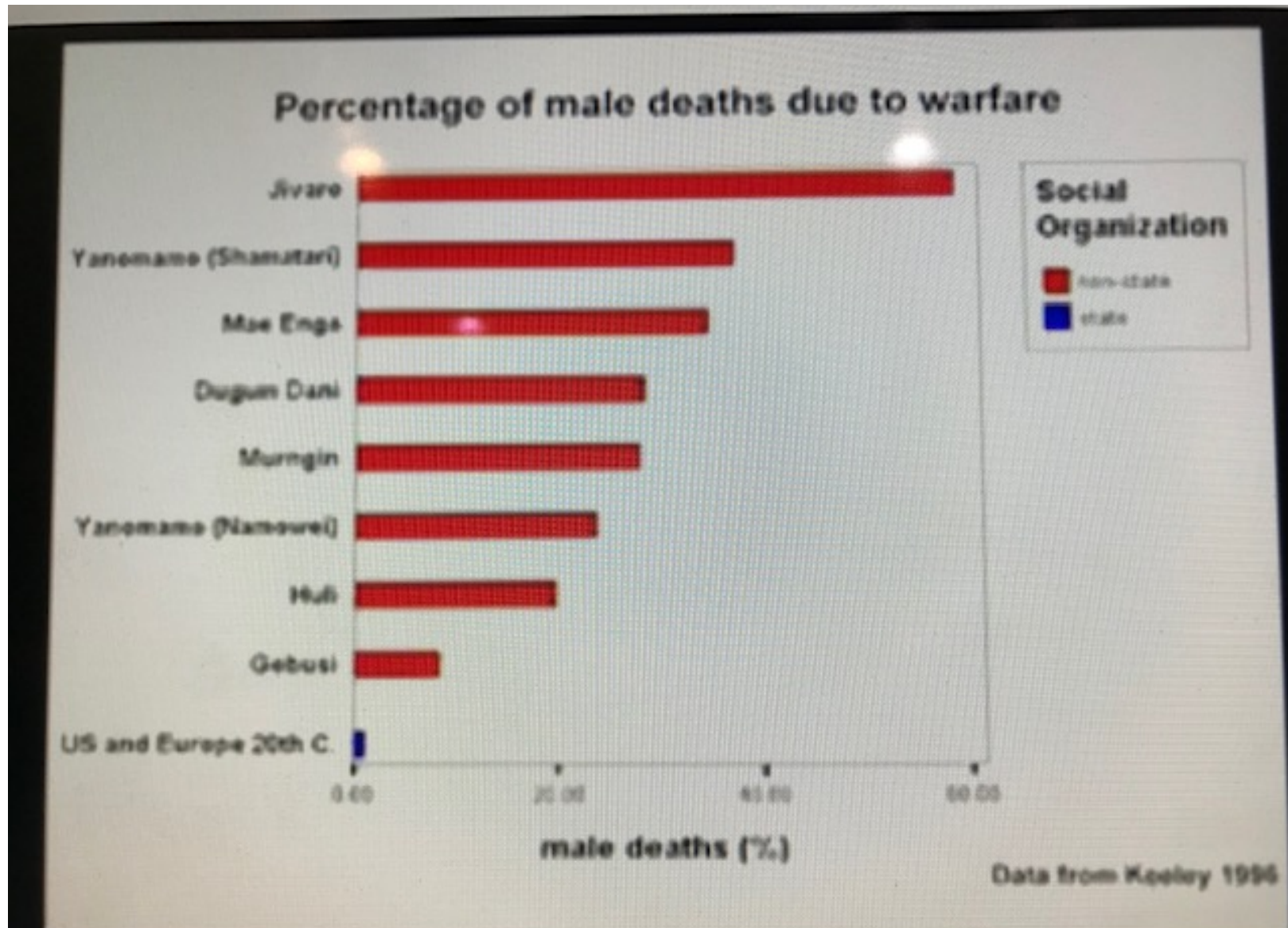
- Evolution seems to require pain, death and extinction.
- Those creatures that can't overcome painful attacks must go extinct
- Those creatures that can, must lead dismal lives.
- Why is this necessary?

# Additional Problems

QUESTION—**why** make a world in which **evolution requires death and extinction**?

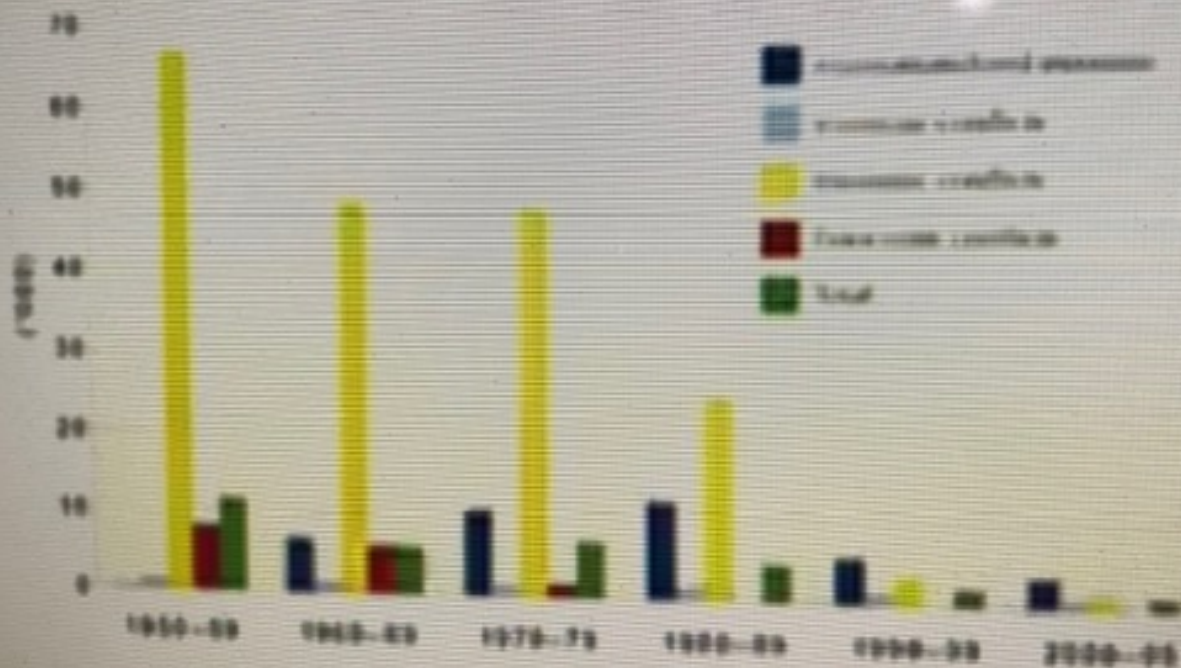
It seems that a certain amount of **evil is necessary for progress**?

# Great Decline in Violence



# Decline in Interstate Wars

Figure 1.4 Average Number of Battle Deaths per State-based Armed Conflict, per Year, 1950-2005\*



Data source: LICOWS and Lacina & Gleditsch\*

Interstate wars, though relatively few in number, are by far the deadliest form of conflict.

Why  
Reduction  
in  
Violence?

- Explanation #4: "The Expanding Circle" (Peter Singer)
  - Evolution bequeathed us with a sense of empathy
  - By default, we apply it only to friends & family
  - Over history, the circle has expanded:
    - village → clan → tribe → nation → other races  
→ both sexes → other species?





## Evidential Theodicy

- There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
- An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
- (Therefore) There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being. [\[2\]](#)