The Tragic Application of Values
(or Misuse of the Moral Sense)

It is often useful to analyze a situation through the lens of the values that motivate the people involved. By recognizing underlying values, we can better understand how people see and experience various issues, how they choose to act, and how they justify their behavior.

A misguided **moral sense** can motivate people to do some awful things. (Steven Pinker on this point.) Our moral sense is a powerful motivating force. It can compel us to be better people, but it can also blind us to the complexities of issues and conflicts. Our moral sense can be dangerous. To avoid making rash decisions, we must combine our moral intuitions with clear-eyed reasoning, weighing the costs and benefits of our positions, actions, and reactions.

When our moral sense leads us astray, we behave badly, but we feel righteous. A few common examples:

Tragic Application of **Fairness**: The perception that steps taken to protect a vulnerable group or individual are, in fact, favoritism or the granting of special privileges.

Tragic Application of **Purity**: The demand that the world ought to conform to a specific vision of perfection, that would exclude, injure, or disenfranchise others or violate their basic human rights.

Tragic Application of **Friendship**: The expectation that a friend must side with you on all things, right or wrong, and that loyalty to one another demands conformity to one another's views, tastes, and preferences.

Tragic Application of **Authority**: Assuming that those in power are infallible and must be obeyed even when orders violate basic moral impulses like compassion and kindness.

Tragic Application of **Cleanliness**: Demanding that children be protected from any and all germs (and then bathing them in antibacterial soap and hand sanitizer) even though we now know that exposure to germs helps develop and strengthen young immune systems.

Basically, the idea is this:
Moral Sense + (plus) Critical Thinking = Safety/Prosperity/Progress
Moral Sense - (minus) Critical Thinking = Danger/Cruelty/Violence

For more on how to use values as tools of analysis, click here.

In Class Work:

Pick three values below and answer the following questions:

a. How might this value have ensured the survival of our hunter-gatherer ancestors?
b. How does this value help guide us towards a better future?
c. How is this value tragically misapplied in our lives and communities?

See List of Values for a list of values.

Value 1:
a. .
b. .
c. .

Value 2:
a. .
b. .
c. .

Value 3:
a. .
b. .
c. .