All signal, no virtue: how ineffective and harmful pedagogical practices spread

> *We are good, perhaps a little too good, but we are also a little stupid; and it is this mixture of goodness and stupidity which lies at the root of our troubles.*
>
> Karl Popper

This paper begins with a case-study and then makes a broader argument about how the proper exercise of the intellectual virtues is undermined by failures of character and institutional incentives. Our topic is the rise and spread of trigger warnings as a pedagogical tool. In part I, we define them and explain how they spread. In part II, we review the justifications for trigger warnings. In part III, we review the empirical evidence and show how it undermines these justifications. In part IV, we make a broader argument that draws on Aristotle and MacIntyre. Given that there never was any good evidence that trigger warnings work, why are they so ubiquitous? We argue that their adoption and use is best explained by a lack of prudence which is explained by two other failures. On the one hand, the unwillingness to speak out is due to a failure of character. Pedagogues are not unable to read the evidence, they are unwilling to speak out when doing is costly and requires courage. On the other hand, educational institutions do not favour virtue because professional success is often at odds with the excellence that is internal to teaching.

Trigger warnings – Education – Prudence – Conformism – Institutions

Part I – Trigger warnings, what and why

Trigger warnings are a distinct and recent form of warning (Bridgland, Jones, and Bellet 2023). Some warnings advise that content is for a mature audience. An X-rated film signals content (ex. drugs, sex, violence) deemed ill-suited for immature viewers. Other warnings advise people that the content is inappropriate for a given context. The expression 'Not Safe for Work' (NSFW) captures the idea that the acceptability of content depends on context.

Trigger warning differ in a few ways. First, they are addressed to a group defined by their vulnerability and past suffering. The textbook case is someone suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Second, they alert the vulnerable that the upcoming content is more likely to trigger them and elicit psychological distress. For this reason, they more frequently precede descriptions of rape than of roadbuilding in Ancient Rome. Third, trigger warnings are meant to help the vulnerable; there is a presumption that they make their addressees better off and that the latter need it.

In sum, trigger warnings signal that upcoming material represents a greater risk of emotional distress for those whose past suffering matches the content. A typical example would be "Warning: the following passage contains descriptions of sexual assault" or "Our next class will discuss intimate partner violence and may be distressing". However, warnings like "Viewer discretion is advised" or "This content is not safe for work" are not trigger warnings.

Some pedagogues might wonder how trigger warnings differ from unremarkable announcements made while teaching.[1] A history teacher might mention that the next lesson deals with the Cambodian killing fields. Is this a trigger warning?

Two points are worth underlining. First, announcing content can be pedagogical rather than therapeutic. Like a good orator signposting during a speech, it can be useful to announce what is

[1] We thank XYZ for raising this question.

to come. One need not believe that content is harmful or dangerous to announce it. Second, even if the material is upsetting that does not amount to pathologizing ordinary human emotions. The miserable and cruel deaths of two million Cambodians under the Communist Party of Kampuchea should move us. However, ordinary emotions and their regulation must not be confused with the severe distress of trauma just as the mild discomfort caused by exercise is not a grievous injury.

Further issues need clarifying. The notion of trauma is frequently misused and misunderstood. A traumatic experience is not an experience that necessarily traumatises everyone who undergoes it. War is traumatising and yet only a minority of combatants suffer from post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD) (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs 2023).[2] Furthermore, certain ascriptions of trauma are controversial. Claims about the genetic transmission of trauma, or intergenerational trauma, are not firmly established (Mitchell 2020). Critics legitimately worry about distinguishing the effects of genetics and socialisation (Birney 2015). Presumptions, even well-intended ones, about someone's condition and a clinical diagnosis are not one and the same.

Even so, the crux of the issue remains unchanged. All these uses of trigger warnings rely on the same reasoning: they benefit those whose past suffering is related to the upcoming content. We can disagree on who the target population is but this does not alter the fact that advocates and users of trigger warnings are trying to help those they think are vulnerable.

A few words are in order on the origins of trigger warnings. Online communities discussing sexual violence seem to have invented trigger warnings in the late 1990s (Bridgland, Jones, and Bellet 2023, 2; Manne 2015; Mannix 2022). Quickly, they spread. By 2014, the student senate of the University of California Santa Barbara, voted a motion to urge instructors to include them in

[2] According to Veteran Affairs, the lifetime prevalence of PTSD is 7%. Even if we take the worst recorded number and generalize for *all combat,* the number reaches 29%. On this pessimistic take, the traumatic experiences of war does not give PTSD to 71% of veterans (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, *How Common is PTSD in Veterans?).*

their syllabi (Byron 2017, 116). Their spread appears to be the result of activism and imitation. There is no evidence that their present ubiquity is the result of pedagogues becoming collectively aware of the findings of any research programme. Unlike vaccines for COVID-19, there were no trials and no rigorous testing. No landmark study proved their efficacy. Advocates argued and urged but none of them produced compelling evidence. As we will see in Part III, research emerged several years after the trend had caught on.

Part II – Why use them?

This section reviews the arguments for trigger warnings published in academic journals or broadsheets for the wider public. The teleological ones claim that they help us achieve some desirable end-state while the non-teleological ones focus on how they treat people, on their intrinsic rather than instrumental value.

Teleological arguments divide into harm reduction and promoting the good. We can identify two variants of harm reduction: avoidance and coping. The first claims that trigger warnings benefit students by helping them avoid distressing material. Interestingly enough, it is rarely endorsed by advocates of trigger warnings and seems motivated by related therapeutic strategies, like the use of therapeutic animals or safe spaces that allow students to exit class or a presentation and find refuge (Shulevitz 2015). Critics of trigger warnings have objected that a quality education does not allow students to avoid difficult topics (Haidt and Lukianoff 2015), but it is very hard to find explicit endorsement of the *avoidance argument* (Dickmann-Burnett 2019).

The second variant of the harm reduction argument is coping. Upon encountering a trigger warning, traumatised students know that the time has come to use their learned coping techniques. Harm is thus reduced by a dignified and informed use of agency: those who wish to overcome the

crippling effects of trauma know when and how to counteract it. Indeed, the *coping argument* appears highly favoured by defenders of trigger warnings in education (Manne 2015; Gust 2016; Dickmann-Burnett 2019). Indeed, those who clearly deny promoting avoidance explicitly endorse trigger warnings as a way to cope. In the *New York Times*, Kate Manne (2015, 5) argues that:

> […] Increasingly, professors like me simply give students notice in their syllabus, or before certain readings assignments. The point is not to enable – let alone encourage – students to skip these readings or our subsequent class discussion (both of which are mandatory in my courses, absent a formal exemption). Rather, it is to allow those who are sensitive to these subjects to prepare themselves for reading about them, and better manage their reactions. The evidence suggests that at least some of the students in any given class of mine are likely to have suffered some sort of trauma, whether from sexual assault or another type of abuse or violence. So I think the benefits of trigger warnings can be significant.

The reasoning is clear. Since one cannot be permanently coping, one needs to be warned to prepare and then apply one's techniques. And if students do so, they can "better manage their reactions". Thus, the ultimate end is harm reduction and the more proximate goal is effective coping which requires adequate warning. Here, harm reduction focuses on those who have already suffered and are therefore at risk to be 'triggered'. Thus, to succeed is to make the worse-off better off.

Again, coping techniques differ from safe spaces. The latter are reactive and are designed to help those who are unable or unwilling to further engage with certain materials. It follows that safe spaces are an *exit* from academic engagement rather than an aid to it.

However, reducing harm is not the only objective. Psychological distress represents an obstacle to learning. We can build on the coping argument to formulate the *learning argument*. Warnings not only help reduce suffering but also improve learning.

Consider two passages. "When students request trigger-warning accommodations, they are informing educators about the importance of the nature of their experience and what they need to fully engage in an academic space" (Byron 2017, 118). It is hard to interpret "fully engage in an academic space" independently of learning without losing sight of what academic institutions are. Similarly, the following passage makes this case by establishing an analogy with accommodations for disabilities.

> A trigger warning does not give permission for students to skip class, avoid a topic or choose alternative readings. What it does is signal to survivors of abuse and trauma that they need to keep breathing. It reminds them to be particularly aware of the skills and coping strategies that they have developed and to switch them on.
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> Triggers warnings are necessary adjustments for students who hold in their bodies one of the most prevalent but also most disabling of wounds – trauma. Like adjustments for dyslexia, they do not solve the challenge of being different, they simply make it easier to navigate the difficulty of living in a world that assumes certain norms (Gust 2016).

Understood as an adjustment, trigger warnings do more than reduce suffering; they improve learning. For creatures such as us, psychological distress negatively affects both our well-being and our ability to learn. Trigger warnings thus help the traumatised learn.

The case for trigger warnings is primarily teleological. It is unclear if anyone considers a non-teleological argument to be decisive. We find claims about "more meaningful academic

experience" or "respectful discourse", but these are never the central argument. It is hard to find someone arguing that *even if* trigger warnings did not substantially help, their non-teleological value would outweigh any stifled speech or the failure to prepare students for a harsh world.

One non-teleological argument would be to reframe a teleological one as anti-discrimination argument. Consider the following passage:

> "[t]he thought behind trigger warnings isn't just that these states are highly unpleasant (although they certainly are). It's that they temporarily render people unable to focus, regardless of their desire or determination to do so. Trigger warnings can work to prevent or counteract this. […] It's not about coddling anyone. It's about enabling everyone's rational engagement" (Manne 2015).

If the refusal to use trigger warnings prevents everyone's rational engagement, then we might consider this to be discrimination: the previously traumatised cannot fully enjoy education or rationally engage. The traditional method is discriminatory and the primary wrong of discrimination is that it expresses disrespect (Eidelson 2015). To summarise, refusing to use trigger warnings is discriminatory therefore it is disrespectful. To use trigger warnings is to express respect for all students.

Prolonging this line of thought, we could argue that trigger warnings are defensible because they enhance autonomy. To be autonomous is to make one's own choices, and to make one's own choices one needs to know the relevant facts. Trigger warnings enhance autonomy by helping agents make informed choices; students who know what to expect can fully exercise their agency. As it is uncontroversial that we value autonomy, it should be relatively uncontroversial that we should favour enhancing the autonomy of fellow agents. Other non-teleological arguments could be similarly constructed by appealing to consensual values like recognition.

Part III: The evidence

In the last few years, empirical studies have emerged on the effects of trigger warnings. A study published in 2019 found that "[…] our meta-analytic confidence intervals were narrow, suggesting high precision – yet still showed trigger warnings plausibly have no effect or might even work slightly in the direction of causing harm" (Sanson, Strange, and Garry 2019, 790).

Another paper, published in 2020, specifically studied the impact of trigger warnings on their target population: *people who have been traumatised*. This design feature ensured that the "trauma naïve" were not muddying the waters by opining on experiences that are foreign to them. This study found that:

> Trigger warnings did not reduce anxiety for this sample broadly. Trigger warnings also did not reduce anxiety among people who met a clinical cutoff for PTSD symptoms, reported a diagnosis of PTSD, or reported that the stimuli matched the content of their past trauma. Trigger warnings showed trivially small effects on response anxiety overall. When effects did emerge, they tended towards small *increases* in anxiety rather than decreases (Jones, Bellet, and McNally 2020, 914).

If we continued to list studies piecemeal one might worry about which are selected or omitted. We therefore turn to the first and only meta-analysis conducted on the effects of trigger warnings. Surveying twelve papers, the meta-analysis found no evidence that trigger warnings work as their advocates claim. They tested the effects of trigger warnings on four dimensions: 'response affect' or emotional reactions to the material, avoidance of the content, anticipatory anxiety, and comprehension of the material.

The results are unambiguous: not a single study found clear positive effects. Trigger warnings neither help individuals cope by regulating their emotional responses, nor do they result in avoidance, nor do they help comprehension or learning. However, they found that:

> Overall, we found that trigger warnings had no meaningful effect on response affect, avoidance, or educational outcomes (i.e., comprehension). However, trigger warnings reliably increased anticipatory distress before viewing material (Bridgland, Jones, and Bellet 2023, 16).

Given that trigger warnings do not improve response affect, avoidance or comprehension, it is mistaken to interpret this anxiety as unpleasant but a reasonable trade-off. This is a cost without any attendant benefit. As the meta-analysis (Bridgland, Jones, and Bellet 2023, 18) concludes:

> Existing research on content warnings, content notes, and trigger warnings suggests that they are fruitless, although they do reliably induce a period of uncomfortable anticipation. Although many questions warrant further investigation, trigger warnings should not be used as a mental-health tool.

While the evidence clearly shows that trigger warnings do no good, the extent to which they harm is more complicated. As mentioned, they raise anticipatory distress but, as the authors of the meta-analysis note, this is "a small increase in negative emotions" (Bridgland, Jones, and Bellet 2023, 17). Anticipatory anxiety is undesirable, and it is even more troubling that it is primarily inflicted on those one is trying to help, i.e. the traumatised, but it is not devastating.

Moreover, the effect of trigger warnings on learning is complicated. While overall they do no good, this is the result of a wash: those who have suffered trauma see the lowest results after reading a trigger warning while those who have not been victimised score the highest (Bruce and

Roberts 2020, 163). Thus, trigger warnings do not generally help learning but the only group that they harm are the traumatised. This is reverse-prioritarianism, or the harming of the worst-off. It is also worth pointing out that only a minority of the studies (25%) tested the effects of trigger warnings on comprehension of the material.

We can identify a final unhappy finding. One paper has found evidence that trigger warnings worsen the aesthetic experience of visual art. Independently of one's political appreciation, everyone's aesthetic appreciation was worsened and negative emotions were raised when trigger warnings were provided prior to viewing visual art (Jones, Bridgland, and Bellet 2023). If replicated, these results reveal two further costs. One, they reduce well-being by lessening our ability to appreciate culture and human excellence. Two, by negatively affecting aesthetic appreciation and raising negative emotion, trigger warnings seem to be closer to indoctrination than education. If everyone's artistic experience is lessened by trigger warnings, then their use seems in tension with the goal of cultivating independent artistic judgment.

At this stage, one might wish to resist the claim that the evidence clearly favours one conclusion. For instance, one might wonder if we are relying too heavily on the above meta-analysis at the expense of other forms of evidence. Furthermore, one might want to find fault with the meta-analysis itself. We reply that this kind of skepticism is unwarranted.

To begin, we would need to know what kind of evidence remains unexamined and whether or not it could outweigh the findings of the meta-analysis. Our reading of the various pieces written in defence of trigger warnings, be they in scholar venues or broadsheets, reveals few if any appeals to empirical studies. Those who do more than assert the benefits of trigger warnings tend to rely on self-reports; they claim that they work, that they produce a certain effect, because that was their personal experience (Nelligan 2022). This is unfortunate because the limitations of self-reports are

well-known. First, they are subject to socially desirable responding, or the tendency to provide flattering self-descriptions. Second, they are vulnerable to recall bias, that is to say the bias that follows from systemic failures to recall events or recall them accurately (Althubaiti 2016).

Therefore, the fundamental problem is that the evidence appealed to by defenders of trigger warnings, such as self-reports, is far weaker than the evidence cited above. Faced with this situation, there are only two options available. Either we adopt a Cartesian or a Pyrrhonian standard for skepticism. On the former, we reject a belief the moment we can identify any reason to doubt it. However, adopting this standard would be self-defeating because the defenders of trigger warnings will face many compelling reasons to doubt their effectiveness as the above meta-analysis makes clear. More generally, there is no point engaging with empirical evidence or the sciences in general if one is going to adopt a Cartesian standard because careful scientific studies rarely, if ever, yield findings that are quite literally indubitable.

If we endorse a Pyrrhonian standard, then the defenders of trigger warnings are no better off. To suspend belief, we need to formulate two opposing arguments of equal strength. However, we have already determined that the evidentiary basis for the effectiveness of trigger warnings is far weaker than the evidence for their ineffectiveness. Therefore, the arguments are of very unequal strength and we have not met the necessary conditions to suspend belief.

In short, appealing to unexamined evidence is a red herring because it camouflages the very unequal value of the evidence at hand. After all, if anecdotes and self-reports were as epistemically valuable as well-designed (randomised) studies then we would struggle to justify the resources we spend to conduct the latter when the former are readily available.

Nor is it reasonable to point to some limitations of the meta-analysis to cast doubt upon its value. For instance, while it is true that a meta-analysis of twelve studies might seem low, this is

deceptive. Not only is an analysis of twelve studies non-negligible, but this limitation is easily explained by the recency of the topic. It may be desirable to conduct more studies, but that fact does not commit us to dismissing a significant amount of scholarship until we reach what appears to be an arbitrary threshold.

Therefore, we maintain that the available empirical evidence on the effectiveness of trigger warnings is remarkably consistent. For their advocates, the facts yield little consolation. The evidence is strongest in support of the claim that they do no good. There is good but less compelling evidence that they do some harm. All in all, the strongest endorsement one can find is that they "introduce difficult-to-weigh trade-offs" (Gainsburg and Earl 2018, 262).

Part III Uninformed arguments and unintended consequences

We now evaluate the arguments in light of the evidence. Both teleological arguments fail because they are unsound. If we should use trigger warnings to help students cope with distressing materials, the problem is a lack of evidence and even dispositive evidence. Even if the coping argument were valid, it is unsound. Trigger warnings do not help students cope and this means that they cannot have any instrumental value because a key premise of the argument is false.

The argument is unsound rather than speculative. Before such studies were conducted and published, these arguments may have been speculative. When no one knows the facts, we rely on plausible assumptions. However, once we have knowledge on the topic, we cannot ignore it. Converging studies by multiple research teams is a strong basis for knowledge. If one's claims are contradicted by such findings, then one is not speculating but wrong. In short, there is a big difference between the claim "no one knows, this seems plausible" and "several studies have tried to establish this claim and all failed". After all, we do not prove a negative but point to the failure

to establish something. As the meta-analysis above clearly states, trigger warnings do not produce the therapeutic effects its proponents claim. As arguments that rely on one or more false premises are unsound, it follows that the *coping argument* is unsound.

Similarly, the *learning argument* claims trigger warnings improve learning outcomes; they help students cope and this allows them to "fully engage". Once again, the meta-analysis is clear: trigger warnings do not help the vulnerable learn. Again, assuming that the argument is valid and remains the case that a key premise is undermined by the evidence. The learning argument is also unsound. Not a single study assessed in the meta-analysis found clear evidence for either effective coping to reduce emotional distress or effective coping to improve learning.

Finally, if we turn to the avoidance argument in our search for a harm reduction argument, we find the exact same problem. The evidence is again unfavourable. Not only does the evidence show that trigger warnings are ineffective tools for avoidance, but they seem to drive more engagement (Bridgland, Jones, and Bellet 2023, 16).

All the teleological arguments are felled by their reliance on false premises. Advocates of trigger warnings have not only failed to motivate key premises but failed to notice that the evidence is dispositive. Like trickle-down economics and horoscopes, there is no evidence that they work.

And even if all these arguments were not unsound, we would still need an all-things-considered argument. As the studies make clear, trigger warnings can impact various outcomes. One could very realistically imagine trigger warnings producing some desirable and some undesirable consequences. We would still need a fuller argument to determine if we should use them. Suppose that trigger warnings raised anticipatory anxiety, but also improved learning. It would seem that we would need to investigate how much they raise anticipatory anxiety, how much they improved comprehension, and then we would need to determine the relative value and

disvalue of these outcomes. So far, the defenders of trigger warnings have not only produced unsound teleological arguments, but they have argued as if all good things coincide. Empirically-informed normative arguments should rely on a less naïve view of the world.

Ironically, there is compelling evidence that trigger warnings are harmful. As stated, they raise the anticipatory anxiety of those who have been traumatised. Moreover, there is some evidence that they worsen the learning outcomes for the traumatised. While trigger warnings have no discernable instrumental value, they do have measurable instrumental disvalue. Judged by their effects, trigger warnings are morally pernicious; they promote neither psychological well-being, nor learning, and yet they manage to harm the only group they purport to help.

While they are not the heart of the debate, the non-teleological arguments deserve to be addressed adequately though briefly. First, the *anti-discrimination* argument fails because there is no sense in which the absence of trigger warnings makes anyone worse off. Because trigger warnings are ineffective, they cannot equalise any situation by offsetting a disadvantage. There is a very important disanalogy between trigger warnings and accommodations like access ramps or extra time for examination. The former are unhelpful while the latter help level the playing field and therefore enable the vulnerable to engage as equals, or more like equals. If anything, insisting on using a tool that harms the worse-off seems quite disrespectful of their status as equals. From those who wish to insist upon the value of respect, we are entitled to a clear answer as to why it is a failure of respect to refuse to use ineffective and possibly harmful methods.

Second, arguments about recognition rely on a *non sequitur*. Social recognition is valuable, but it is entirely unclear why it should be achieved in the classroom and if it is best achieved within that setting. Time, place, and manner, as lawyers are fond to say, need to be considered. And even if one were to argue that educational institutions should help us make the suffering of the

traumatised more salient or less stigmatised, this again misses the mark because one can debate and discuss trauma and even oppressive features of a society without making any use of trigger warnings. For instance, post-secondary students, particularly female ones, might worry about sexual assault and believe that it is downplayed in their societies. They may believe that this minimisation is oppressive. Still, this in no way explains why trigger warnings are the effective or proper way of combatting this social ill. Recall Part I, trigger warnings are meant to help the traumatised; they are not tools for general social reform.

Third, the idea that trigger warnings are autonomy enhancing confuses extrinsic issues with the purpose of trigger warnings. Once we accept that trigger warnings are unable to help the traumatised, then a plea for informed agency is no longer a plea to help the vulnerable help themselves. It is merely a plea for communicating information. More precisely, it is a plea to communicate information that will serve no practical purpose because it plays no role in any therapeutic practice. And once we abandon the therapeutic aim of trigger warnings, there is no principled reason to assume that autonomy requires that one provide this information. In fact, if the information provided by trigger warnings is unrelated to achieving any practical aim, such as reducing symptoms of distress, then providing *this piece information* is no more autonomy enhancing than providing *any other piece of information*.

We also wish to note that the work of educators requires constant trade-offs. The sole goal of enhancing autonomy threatens to overwhelm them. Enhancing the autonomy of each and every student, in each and every manner, is a Sisyphean task. This is particularly so if we are only provided vague normative guidelines. How much autonomy enhancement is enough?

To recapitulate, the evidence we have examined puts the advocate of trigger warnings painfully on the backfoot. For teleological arguments, key premises are contradicted by the

evidence. Not a single research team can point to clear benefits in terms of response affect, avoidance, or learning outcomes. Regrettably, their most reliable effect is to raise the anticipatory anxiety of the traumatised. Our discussion of non-teleological arguments reveals that we have good reason to be sceptical. One can value respect, recognition, and autonomy but it does not follow that one must or should adopt trigger warnings to honour these values.

Part IV The enemies of prudence

Need we add anything? The arguments rested on false premises; they are unsound. Advocates believed or hoped that certain facts obtained but they were mistaken. Perhaps the greatest take away would be that while the goal might have been to prioritize those who are worse-off, the fact is that they harm the worst off. If the argument for adopting trigger warnings is to improve the world by bettering the classroom in various ways, then the evidence should lead us to firmly reject them as they act as a kind of reverse-prioritarianism.

However, this story does not capture the distinct failures that led to rapid adoption and widespread use of an ineffective and possibly damaging pedagogical practice. In fact, this case-study is a textbook illustration of how a key intellectual virtue, prudence, is undermined by failures of character and failures in institutional incentive structures. Reflecting upon these failures allows us to better appreciate the enduring value of the virtues in professional activity.

Let us recapitulate what the virtues are. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, there are two kinds of virtues: those of character and those of the mind. The former are "about feelings and actions" (Aristotle EN 1106b25). Virtue is more than behaviour; it also includes the emotions that accompany or motivate the act. A man who gives to a beggar is not truly generous if he hates doing

so or only does so to look good. We might think it good or better that the homeless person receive money and yet we would deny that his benefactor is virtuous.

One's character can be ranked as vicious, incontinent, continent or virtuous (Aristotle EN 1045b1-15). On the extremes, we find harmony between emotion, reason and action.[3] The vicious are moved by feeling and reason to choose what is base and then act accordingly. Similarly, the virtuous reason and feel so to choose what is fine and then act accordingly. The middle categories are characterized by disharmony and imperfect patterns. The incontinent behave as the vicious person does but their feelings and reason are at loggerheads. They want what is base and know that it is low. When they behave as the virtuous would, this is because their reason overcomes their feelings. The continent are also disordered. Their behaviour appears virtuous but their reason and feelings clash. Their feelings are still too base but they succeed because reason triumphs more often. Concretely, a generous person gives and wishes to give. The continent will often give as they should, because reason overcome their aversion. The incontinent will rarely give because they are too averse to sharing; they rarely overcome these feelings despite knowing better. The vicious do not share and do not judge that their aversion to it is base.

Our immediate focus, however, is on intellectual virtues not on character virtues like courage or magnanimity. For Aristotle, something's virtue depends upon its function. An intellectual virtue is a state that makes the mind excellent just as courage is a state that makes one's character excellent. There are several intellectual virtues but we are most concerned with *phronesis,* practical wisdom or prudence. For Aristotle (EN 1141b10-17):

[3] This is the standard reading of Book VII. In Book IX, the vicious appear to be internally conflicted.

Prudence, by contrast, is about human concerns, about things open to deliberation. For we say that deliberating well is the function of the prudent person more than anyone else; but no one deliberates about things that cannot be otherwise, or about things lacking any goals that is a good achievable in action. The unqualifiedly good deliberator is the one whose aim accords with rational calculation in pursuit of the best good for a human being that is achievable in action. Nor is prudence about universal only. It must also acquire knowledge of particulars, since it is concerned with action and action is about particulars.

To excel on this dimension, to be prudent, is to reason well in order to achieve what is *good for* humans. And to understand what is good for humans it is insufficient to only know universals. One cannot properly feed a human if one only knows something generic like humans need nourishment. Whether this particular bit of organic matter is healthy or unhealthy is crucial to guide action. Humans can safely eat a chicken's liver but if they eat a polar bear's liver, they will die of an overdose of vitamin A. To help a human flourish is always to help a particular human flourish in a particular context. That humans in general can eat something does not tell us whether a particular human can do so safely, e.g. deadly allergies. Thus, prudence requires a lot more than knowledge of and reasoning about generic or universal claims.

Consider again trigger warnings in education. A prudent pedagogue must know quite a bit to help students succeed. As specialists of a sort, pedagogues learn about a specific field or topic. Teachers and professors of mathematics should know more about the discipline than not only the average citizen but also more than teachers who specialise in other disciplines. Yet, the practice of teaching is not the same thing as learning or research. Good pedagogues know how to convey and share their knowledge. Put otherwise, pedagogues are useless if they are not an improvement on autodidacticism. The fundamental difference between someone who is *good at* tango or

trigonometry and someone who is *good at teaching* these is the latter's ability to reliably help others achieve proficiency or mastery of the discipline.

Teaching requires understanding much about the subject matter, but it also requires understanding how humans learn. This involves grasping general facts about how humans learn and responding to the particular challenges that one encounters. For instance, almost anyone knows that speaking as fast as one can when lecturing or answering questions is counter-productive. Effective communication requires a measured pace of speech and we usually learn this at a relatively young age. Yet, we also know that good teaching requires engaging with the particular, e.g. there is no universal "challenging student". One must always engage with specific challenges. A foreign student struggling with the language of instruction is not the same as one confusing qualitative and quantitative differences.

Prudence is more than lofty goals or pure intentions. To be prudent requires being clever, that is to say capable of habitually achieving one's aims through successful means-ends reasoning (Hursthouse 2023, 45, 55-56). A prudent pedagogue is more than one who wishes for something to be so; it is someone who habitually succeeds in achieving their benevolent aims. And if the issue facing a prudent pedagogue is the impact of trauma on the classroom, the successful action requires understanding both the problem and the appropriate solution. Because prudence is about attaining "practical truth", a prudent person must know the relevant facts (Ibid 45). Yet, the previous sections have clearly shown that the advocates and users of trigger warnings know little or nothing about trauma as an obstacle and the ineffectiveness of trigger warnings as a way to overcome it.

One cannot choose the appropriate remedy without understanding the illness at hand. Yet, those who have written in favour of trigger warnings fail to do so. In her *New York Times* piece quoted above, Kate Manne (2015, 5) explicitly compares trauma to phobia. She writes:

> Mr. Lukianoff and Professor Haidt also argue in their article that we shouldn't give trigger warnings, based on the efficacy of exposure therapy - where you are gradually exposed to the object of a phobia, under the guidance of a trained psychotherapist. But the analogy works poorly. Exposing students to triggering material without warning seems more akin to occasionally throwing a spider at an arachnophobe.

This passage is rife with error. First, phobias are automatically activated in the presence of fear-relevant stimuli (Mineka and Ohman 2002, 932). Arachnophobes respond to highly specific and predictable fear-relevant stimuli, namely spiders or things that resemble them. Trauma triggers, however, need not be meaningfully connected to one's past trauma (Ehlers, Hackmann, and Michael 2004, 407). Someone traumatised by combat or by sexual assault need not be triggered by depictions of war or sexual assault. Many triggers are *temporally associated* with the event – the trigger merely happened to be contemporaneous. The gap between the traumatising event and the trigger can be astounding. Indeed, something like "a pattern of light, or tone of voice" (Ibidem) will act as a trigger despite not being particularly connected to the traumatic event, whether it was a traffic accident, battle, or sexual assault. This explains why the traumatised experience triggers as sudden and unexpected; because there is no obvious connection. Finally, the lack of inherent connection between the trigger and the traumatic event makes the preparation of a list of trauma-triggers long and iterative.[4]

Therefore, when a professor at an Ivy League university, asserts, without evidence, in one of the most influential broadsheets in the world that to fail to use trigger warnings is like knowingly

[4] Correspondence with Dr. Payton J. Jones.

presenting fear-relevant stimuli to someone with a phobia, she reveals her ignorance of both the problem posed by trauma and the solutions. At the very least, she shows herself to be imprudent.

Second, the point of the comparison was to cast the refusal to use trigger warnings as unnecessarily cruel like wilfully provoking someone's phobic response. Yet, given that anything can be a trigger, to avoid cruelty one would need to warn about anything from turning on the classroom lights, to making a sudden gesture, to using a certain tone of voice, and so on. But this raises a further issue – if anything can be a trigger, then nothing guarantees that the warning itself could not be triggering. While it is easy to avoid presenting the specific fear-relevant stimulus to a phobic person, it is almost impossible to avoid triggers for the traumatised. To assume that a trigger must be related to the trauma in the way that fear-relevant stimuli is related to the nature of the phobia betrays grave ignorance.

To summarise, the advocates of trigger warnings have argued as if there was a strong and tight association between the trauma event and what triggers re-experiencing symptoms. This is patently false. *Anything* can be a trigger and often enough triggers are unexpected. At the risk of repetition, this is why those who are triggered feel blindsided – the nature of the traumatic event is a poor predictor of what will trigger them in the future. Given these facts, trigger warnings seem to more reliably assuage the conscience of those providing them than to protect the traumatised.

Prudence requires understanding both universals and particulars such that it can successfully guide choice and action in the pursuit of the human good. Yet, the defenders of trigger warnings have shown a disquieting level of ignorance of the relevant knowledge. Trauma triggers are not equivalent to phobias and to assume that they are betrays ignorance. To model trauma on phobia is misleading and undermines one's ability to reliably and successfully respond to it. Moreover, as we have seen, the belief that trigger warnings are helpful has no factual basis. When

advocates like Dr. Manne wrote their defences, the most charitable thing that we could say is that they were speculating. Since then, multiple studies have invalidated the key claims that trigger warnings are helpful. Worse, as we saw in the last section, these studies reveal that trigger warnings likely make the traumatised worse-off.

Even if advocates of trigger warnings argued that this practice was experimental, they would still face criticism. Prudent practitioners of any profession should know that our knowledge and best practices need updating. That is to say, at some point the experiment comes to an end and we need to judge its success. More generally, what we learned in training, recently or long ago, might be incomplete or outdated. If the prudent are to succeed, then they cannot regularly act on false or outdated information. The prudent must occasionally check and update their beliefs. However, it is difficult to find any advocates of trigger warnings who have revised their views as study after study invalidated key claims. The meta-analysis draws on papers published as early as 2018. Today, there is little evidence that authors cited in Part II revised their views. The objection can be thus formulated. If the purpose of prudence is to successfully guide choice and action towards the human good, then no one can be prudent if they are clearly ignorant of relevant information to the achievement of the good pursued. Those advocating for or using trigger warnings are acting neither on the best available evidence nor any serious evidence. Tragically, there is little evidence that they ever sought these facts; the practice spread long before anyone had any reliable data.

One might find this too uncharitable. First, the practice was not invented on the spot. It had existed for years in online forums for those discussing trauma. Second, we cannot constantly update all of our beliefs. The task would be all consuming. All of us, even models of prudence, are acting on some incomplete and outdated beliefs.

Our response allows us to further discuss the failures involved in the adoption and continued use of trigger warnings. First, it is true that trigger warnings were not clandestinely invented by malevolent pedagogues. However, the fact that something is an established practice, somewhere, is poor evidence of its effectiveness. If trigger warnings are alleged to have a therapeutic aim, then we should only use them if we have compelling evidence that they work. Thus far the evidence is overwhelmingly dispositive.

Naturally pedagogues talk to each other about their experiences. Encouragement from peers and appreciative words from students have certainly led some educators to sincerely believe that trigger warnings work. However, we would suggest that pedagogues must also realise the weakness of this case. Anyone responsible for teaching critical thinking should realise the limits of anecdotal evidence and the risk of confirmation bias.

The recent COVID-19 pandemic produced an unfortunate number of wild claims about how to avoid infection or treat it. We see little reason to draw a principled distinction between those amateurs who improvised solutions to a serious respiratory illness and those improvising remedies for serious mental health issues. If trauma is worth taking seriously, if it warrants the attention of pedagogues and changes to their professional conduct, then it is far too serious to rely on the unverified self-reports of untutored amateurs. If mental health is a serious issue, it deserves serious evidential standards. A prudent person does not treat human well-being so cavalierly.

The second objection makes an important point. It is true that we cannot constantly update all of our beliefs. And it is true that we all are likely to act on some incomplete and outdated information. Overwhelmingly, we rely on indirect knowledge and updating all our beliefs would be an interminable task.

However, here too there is a division of labour. No one seriously expects pedagogues to constantly revise all of their beliefs. Rather, there is a legitimate expectation that pedagogues should be better informed on issues relating to their profession just as we expect military officers to follow developments relating to war. A prudent pedagogue therefore needs to keep up to date with information relevant to their actions, namely teaching. If they have identified certain conditions, diseases or handicaps that pose a challenge then they should be trying to update their beliefs to properly respond to these challenges.

No one is asking pedagogues to be omniscient. But if pedagogues are going to promote and use new tools and claim that the justification is the well-being of students, then then there is nothing unreasonable about expecting them to proceed on the basis of up-to-date information. Moreover, there are not an infinite number of controversial new pedagogical tools. Updating one's beliefs on one of the controversies *du jour* within one's profession is reasonable.

A further question is raised by the above argument. Given that trigger warnings have been used and promoted for about two decades and that serious empirical research only began emerging in 2018, what explains such widespread imprudence? Why would so many pedagogues endorse them so swiftly and uncritically? The best explanation, we fear, is the failure of intellectual and moral virtues aided and encouraged by institutional pressures.

We begin with conformism. There are two kinds of conformism, strategic and non-strategic (Hill and Garner 2021). The latter kind is a decent kind of conformism. All of us must, more or less frequently, defer to the superior knowledge or judgment of others. When faced with a contagious virus we should trust epidemiologists and virologists. At other times, it is wise to put our faith in numbers. The best reason to think that something is vulgar or boring is that so many

believe so. Non-strategic conformism is the kind of pro-social deference and trust that all communities require to function well and that all of us practice to varying degrees.

If non-strategic conformism was at play, then pedagogues may have acted in good faith and on the best of intentions, but this is still a failure of intellectual virtue. Consider the non-strategic conformism that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. We deferred to experts of the relevant type. Evidence was presented and discussed. Yet, which eminent experts of trauma took up the cause of trigger warnings? Which studies were produced to support their claims? Deferring to others is only virtuous is one has good reason to trust their judgment. Given that pedagogues have presumably received university training, know how to search for evidence, and read a scholarly paper, it is hard to imagine how such deference to either fashion or superiors lacking the relevant expertise amounted to a display of intellectual virtue. Teachers and professors are precisely those we trust to teach research skills and critical thinking. Yet, faced with very strong claims about crucial issues, like mental health and learning, those presumably responsible for training others to think critically and to differentiate between expert and amateur opinion conformed with little hesitation. Their conformism might have been non-strategic, but it was also naïve and unjustified.

Strategic conformism is not motivated by genuine deference or trust. Rather it is the conformism driven by self-interest. To conform for strategic reasons is to go along to get along rather than to act on any ethical or epistemic principle. More precisely, strategic conformism is either motivated by a defensive aim to preserve one's position or an offensive aim to improve it. In both cases, the need to communicate that one conforms to the group's aim, or ethos or ideology is at the heart of much virtue signalling (Hill and Garner 2021). One says and does as others do because failure to conform poses a threat to one's reputation or status.

This brings us to a final point about the link between moral and intellectual virtues. Prudence without courage is of limited value. This is not to endorse the stronger thesis that is the unity of the virtues, that one must possess all of the virtues in order to possess any individual virtue. Rather, the claim is that one might genuinely possess a virtue but if the lack of another inhibits the full exercise of the former, this diminishes the value of the inhibited virtue. Consider prudence in the absence of courage. If some pedagogues came to the conclusion that trigger warnings were useless or unlikely to help but conformed out of fear of social repercussions, then their prudence was inhibited by their unwillingness or inability to face risk. While some risks might warrant such behaviour, we take it that pedagogues should be made of sterner stuff and face mild threats, such as public criticism or mockery. After all, if prudence is about achieving the human good, in this case helping us achieve the good for those who struggle with mental health, then it seems that fear for one's reputation or status should be overcome. And the relevant virtue to overcome fear and danger is courage.

Put otherwise, if strategic conformism is responsible for the adoption and dissemination of trigger warnings then this means that a lack of courage is the deeper explanation. Make no mistake, the case of trigger warnings presents us with trained professionals unwilling to face mild risks when it is their role to openly and honestly reason and teach others how to do so. To reprise the Aristotelian scale, the most charitable interpretation is that this repeated failure to face these mild risks is incontinence and the least charitable view is that it is vicious. Either way, the best explanation for the misuse of an intellectual virtue (prudence) is a failure of character (courage).

None of the above is a denial of the social structures and more precisely the institutions that have played a role in these failures of virtue. Excellences of character or of the mind are not cultivated or corrupted in a vacuum. Schools and universities share in these failures of character

and of the mind. A useful way to explain their corrupting effects is to draw on Alasdair MacIntyre's (1981) famous analysis of virtue, practices, and institutions. Virtues are the forms of excellence necessary to achieve the goods that are internal to a social practice, a cooperative social activity with internal norms of excellence. To excel at chess or farming, to flourish as a chess-player or a farmer, one needs to develop certain virtues. However, complex social practices occur within a broader social world and the structures that sustain them have their own goods that are external to the practice, like fame, money or power. One might want to excel at chess and one may also need to interact with chess clubs, federations and so on. Because the latter are institutions, they have aims other than the excellence of the practice, such as being profitable or famous. Thus, there is a constant tension between the goods internal to the practice and the goods external to it but with which relevant institutions are concerned.

Schools and universities are institutions. Whether the specific practice is scholarship, teaching or something else, this is a distinction that makes little difference. If trigger warnings, or any other ill-justified pedagogical tool, are promoted by one's hierarchical superiors, if these are presented as part of a broader ideology endorsed by those who hire, promote, and fire, then individual members of the profession may need to choose between the goods internal to their practice, such as intellectual rigour or integrity, and the external goods, such as their salaries. As many in education already know this picture whilst sadly true is incomplete. Teachers and professors are not simply confronted with their immediate superiors. External institutions, such as ministries of education or various institutions distributing research funds, can and do exert pressure to conform with particular ideologies or at the very least signal that one acquiesces. The presentations of funds and the application forms make this plain. Additionally, students and parents are increasingly treating education as a transactional relation in which payment rather than

expertise determines which choices should be made. Which means that pressure to conform is not only coming from above by department chairs, deans, or national funding agencies, but also from below as students and parents consider themselves qualified to judge and criticise the professional conduct of pedagogues. Unfortunately, these two forms of pressure can be mutually reinforcing.

In other words, the institutional design of schools and universities does not favour the cultivation of virtue. Instead, the incentive structure and the pervading ideology encourages conformism, strategic or non-strategic. The spread of trigger warnings, ineffective and harmful, is the result of a failure of prudence on the part of pedagogues. However, the failure of pedagogues to be prudent or to voice their prudent thinking must be explained by other failures. In part, it is a failure of courage. Members of a profession who are fond of slogans like "Speaking truth to power" have often failed to follow through. In part, it is the predictable result of poor institutional design and culture. For all their rhetoric about independence of thought or speaking truth to power, or the need to challenge everything, schools and universities are institutions moved by external goods.

A final objection still stands. One can condemn trigger warnings and also reject our characterisation of the failure. This error does not prove that pedagogues were imprudent. After all, Aristotle argued that small deviations from goodness were not to be blamed but only wide ones. (NE 1109b15-20). Trigger warnings are but one pedagogical tool and we ought not draw overly strong conclusion on the basis of the failures of those who have promoted or used them.

The answer is that while we centred our paper around a case-study, similar failures are not rare. The recent history of pedagogy in Western countries is littered with imprudence and conformism. Learning styles, the notion that there is no single most effective way to learn but that different students have different learning styles and that teaching should reflect a diversity of

approaches to learning had been promoted for decades before it was adequately tested and the results made clear. There is no good evidence for learning styles (Pashler 2008; Cuevas 2015).

We also witnessed strong disagreement over how to teach students to read, the so-called "reading wars" (Sohn 2020). Here too, the empirical evidence did not and does not stack equally. The old-fashioned and maligned phonics approach has been vindicated, by numerous studies and now a meta-analysis (Jeynes 2007; Report of the National Reading Panel 2000; Report of the National Early Literacy Panel 2008). There might have been conjecture for both sides, but there never was strong evidence that the two rival approaches were equally effective.

Very recently, we have seen a drive to include screens and 'modernise' teaching. And yet again, we see that university-educated pedagogues either sincerely endorsed or silently acquiesced to unproven methods and weak arguments. Today, countries that led this trend, like Sweden, are backtracking in the face of damning evidence (Associated Press 2023; Deconinck 2023).

In short, the failures behind trigger warnings were not exceptional. Failures of prudence, failures of courage as well as institutional pressures to conform providing a very compelling explanation as to why primary and secondary school teachers, college and university professors have so often failed to live up to the standards they profess. Aristotle would be unsurprised. Virtue, moral and intellectual, was always a question of both individual achievement and good institutions.

In the final analysis, we draw two morals. First, even if one can possess one virtue without possessing them all, the failure to cultivate or exercise a virtue can inhibit the exercise of another. An intellectual virtue like prudence is diminished if its possessor lacks courage; if fear can keep us from acting prudently, then prudence without courage is considerably less valuable. Second, we have the characters that we seek to train and reward. If pedagogues are such conformists, it is due to the training and reinforcement that occurs within educational institutions.

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