On the Epistemology of Trigger Warnings; Or, Why the Coddling Argument against Trigger Warnings Is Misguided

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Abstract

Trigger warnings have been the flashpoints of many discussions in recent years. A prominent claim among those arguing against trigger warnings is what I will call the "coddling argument" (CA), according to which trigger warnings *coddle* by allowing people to avoid ideas that they disagree with or find difficult. In this paper, I try to both make sense of and refute the coddling argument from a vice epistemological perspective. As I argue, CA is best understood as an expression of concern about the encouragement of *epistemic vices*, specifically in higher education, which lead to people avoiding and closing themselves off from difficult or challenging topics. I argue that this is misguided: trigger warnings exist for people who need to be warned about certain contents *because they already know* about these issues. Demands for such warnings are usually made by those who have *themselves* experienced the difficult things defenders of CA purport they are trying to hide from. We do, however, need to take into account that trigger warnings might be misused by those who really *do* need to learn about topics that might be a trigger for others, and I will discuss how this issue could be addressed.

Keywords: epistemic vices, trigger warnings, epistemic coddling, higher education, active knowledge

Trigger warnings have been the flashpoint of many discussions in recent years. Countless opinion pieces have been written about the topic, with one side arguing that trigger warnings are an important and legitimate safety strategy for people who have experienced trauma, and the other holding that trigger warnings, particularly in the context of higher education, undermine both free speech and academic freedom. A prominent claim among those who argue against trigger warnings is what I will call the "coddling argument" (CA), according to which trigger warnings *coddle* by allowing people to avoid ideas that they disagree with or find difficult.

In this article, I focus on the coddling argument and try to both make sense of and refute this argument from a vice epistemological perspective. CA, as I argue, is best understood as an expression of concern about the encouragement of *epistemic*

vices, character traits or dispositions that systematically obstruct or stifle knowledge and its pursuit. My argument is that this claim is misguided: trigger warnings exist for people who need to be warned about certain contents that could distress them *because they already know* about these issues. Demands for trigger warnings are usually made by those who have *themselves* experienced the difficult things that defenders of CA purport that they are trying to hide from, and should largely be understood as requests to be able to *stay in touch* with topics without being unnecessarily triggered.

Here is my plan for the following: First, I say a few words about *what* trigger warnings are. Second, I introduce the coddling argument, following Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt's (2015, 2018) article and book titled after the phrase "the coddling of the American mind." I make sense of CA as an implicitly epistemic argument, by situating it in the light of the epistemic goals and aims of higher education,[1] and further analysing Lukianoff and Haidt's claims using José Medina's (2013) framework of epistemic vices. Third, I argue that those asking for trigger warnings *already* have intimate knowledge and insights into the topics that they need to be warned about; CA obscures how knowledge can be socially situated, and misunderstands what trigger warnings are supposed to do. I argue that a nuanced practice of trigger warnings can encourage *active knowledge*, in enabling conscious and informed participation. Fourth, I address the worry that trigger warnings might, nevertheless, be misused by those who really *do* need to learn about topics that might be triggering for others, and think about how this issue could be dealt with.

My main aim is to make explicit the so far underappreciated connection between trigger warnings and the domain of social and vice epistemology, which will both enable us to understand some arguments *against* trigger warnings and provide us with the tools to show where they are misguided.

1. What Are Trigger Warnings?

We often find trigger warnings in the preface of some kind of publication—among other things, articles, blogs, posts on social media platforms, shows, movies,

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[1] With this focus on higher education, I'm not suggesting that there aren't other contexts with distinctive epistemic goals that could be relevant with regards to trigger warnings (e.g., activist groups, reading circles, etc.). It is noteworthy, though, that there are few places where discussions about trigger warnings have become as heated as in higher education. Moreover, CA itself puts its focus on higher education specifically. Given this, and the specific epistemic goals of academia (e.g., the pursuit of knowledge), it makes sense to investigate the epistemic role of trigger warnings in higher education specifically. Thanks to an anonymous referee for urging me to clarify this contextual issue.

workplace presentations, documentaries, or lectures. They are used to make people aware—to *warn* them—of the occurrence of subsequent graphic images or descriptions of, among other things, racism, (sexual) violence, homophobia, transphobia, war, and bullying, with the aim to support those for whom a sudden encounter with such materials could "trigger" traumatic memories, emotions, or general flashbacks, possibly resulting in panic attacks, self-harm, or other forms of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) (see Kyrölä 2018; Gerdes 2019; James 2017).[2] Often shortened to the initials TW, trigger warnings will most likely be a couple of phrases or a short paragraph, broadly describing the subsequent content and their potentially upsetting nature in general terms (Kyrölä 2018, 31).[3]

While trigger warnings are sometimes claimed to be a very recent phenomenon, they have been around for a while: Some sources place their clinical origins in attempts to meet the needs of Vietnam War veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder; other evidence suggests that they go as far back as World War I (James 2017, 297). The practice of trigger warnings as we use them today can mostly be traced to feminist groups in the late 1980s and 1990s, where people started using them "to give people a heads-up before details of violence were spoken out loud" (Clare 2017, xix). As Eli Clare points out, they were mainly introduced due to the concern that, without such warnings, some people would lose access to groups and communities (xix). The idea is, that trigger warnings can allow trauma survivors to *prepare themselves* for the upcoming discussion in order to *remain* part of it. However, this idea is often criticized in contemporary discussions, in some extreme cases of PTSD, because trigger warnings might be used to *avoid* content that might be triggering. For example, a survivor of sexual assault might avoid watching a film containing graphic rape scenes.[4]

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[2] Not every survivor of trauma will (always) be in need of or request trigger warnings. In this article, however, I will focus on those who are.

[3] Recently, there have been moves to more "neutral" notions like "content" warning, motivated by the idea to broaden the discussion beyond more medical notions like PTSD. In this article, I stick with the notion "trigger warning" because, at time of writing, it's still commonly used in literature and discussions on the topic and remains a familiar way of describing them. Moreover, I am primarily interested here in the more specific case where the absence of a warning could set off PTSD symptoms for an individual.

[4] Moreover, there are some recent empirical studies discussing the effectiveness of trigger warnings. E.g., Sanson, Strange, and Garry (2019, 780) measured "the extent to which trigger warnings changed the rates of symptoms of distress—negative affect, intrusive thoughts, and avoidance," concluding that trigger warnings didn't make a notable difference. While they have been criticized for not focusing their study on

At this point we can't really discuss trigger warnings without bringing up higher education. The requests for, and introduction of, trigger warnings at campuses quickly led to their becoming flashpoints of debates about values, norms, and academic freedom (Gerdes 2019), provoking discussions (predominantly, but not exclusively, in American contexts) "about free speech and excessive political correctness, labeling as opposed to informing, and empowerment versus infantilization" (James 2017, 296). For example, the report *On Trigger Warnings*, drafted by the American Association of University Professors (2014, 1) argues that trigger warnings pose a "threat to academic freedom in the classroom." They state that the alleged presumption that "students need to be protected rather than challenged in a classroom is at once infantilizing and anti-intellectual" (2), and that requiring them could lead to a penalization of staff for refusing to include trigger warnings. Arguments along similar lines are presented by Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt (2015, 2018) in their already mentioned work on "the coddling of the American mind," which will be my focus in the following.

2. Making Sense of Arguments against Trigger Warnings as Epistemic Arguments

Lukianoff and Haidt (2015, 2018) argue that trigger warnings are bad not only because they undermine free speech but also because they encourage hyperfragility, emotional reasoning, hiding, and looking away from contents one finds difficult or disagrees with—according to them, they stand in the way of the educational pursuit of knowledge. Here, I take Haidt and Lukianoff's claims as representative of the coddling argument. In the following, I try to make sense of CA as an epistemic argument by reconstructing Lukianoff and Haidt's (2015, 2018) claims, situating them within the broader discussion of the epistemic aims and goals of (higher) education, to then analyse CA by using Medina's (2013) framework of epistemic vices.

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those *with* trauma or PTSD (as pointed out in Khazan [2019]), Jones, Bellet, and McNally (2020, 914) suggest that "giving trigger warnings to trauma survivors caused them to view trauma as more central to their life narrative," leading to an elevated experience of PTSD, and that for "individuals who met a clinical cutoff for severity of PTSD symptoms, trigger warnings slightly *increased* anxiety" (915). While they do express some worries that trigger warnings might encourage avoidance, I won't go into detail with a discussion of these studies here, as their analysis doesn't focus on the "coddling" issue. It should be noted, however, that proponents of trigger warnings don't usually expect the warning to *eliminate* negative responses but suggest that it is helpful for people to be *warned* before entering a discussion relating to their trauma (see Harlow 2016).

The Coddling Argument

In their original article, Lukianoff and Haidt (2015) diagnose the beginnings of a movement, "undirected and driven largely by students, to scrub campuses clean of words, ideas, and subjects that might cause discomfort or give offense." They see trigger warnings specifically as a demand to highlight "a long list of ideas and attitudes that some students find politically offensive, in the name of preventing other students from being harmed" (ibid.). The ultimate aim is "to turn campuses into 'safe spaces' where young adults are shielded from words and ideas that make some uncomfortable" (ibid.). They emphasize especially how "the very idea of helping people with anxiety disorders avoid the things they fear is misguided" (ibid.)—which is, according to them, what trigger warnings do. They give a parallel example of a woman who, after being trapped in an elevator, develops a deep phobia of elevators. If we want to help her, they say, we shouldn't encourage her avoidance but provide support through *exposure* therapy. The same goes for trigger warnings: according to Lukianoff and Haidt, trigger warnings are "attempts to shield students from words, ideas, and people that might cause them emotional discomfort" (ibid.), rather than exposing them to new, challenging ideas.

As such, trigger warnings stand in stark contrast with what the university, and higher education in general, *ought* to do: universities' "core mission of education and research" (Lukianoff and Haidt 2018, 16) is intimately tied to the pursuit of "truth" and "knowledge" (254). In the literature on philosophy of education, these are often outlined as (part of) the epistemic goals and aims of (higher) education (Robertson 2010)[5]—alongside the argument that "education ought to aim to have positive effects on the epistemic character of students" (Kidd 2019, 220). According to Haidt and Lukianoff, trigger warnings are bad for two reasons: They negatively impact the epistemic goals of education *overall* (e.g., by limiting the possibility of gaining knowledge), and they have *negative*, rather than positive, effects on the epistemic character of students (e.g., by fostering closed-mindedness). In their words, "If the telos of a university is truth, then a university that fails to add to humanity's growing body of knowledge, or that fails to transmit the best of that knowledge to its students, is not a good university" (Lukianoff and Haidt 2018, 254).

I understand these worries as *epistemic* in their nature: Lukianoff and Haidt are worried about how trigger warnings impact the pursuit of knowledge, truth, and

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[5] While much could be said about these goals, for now I merely want to point out some central questions regarding these fundamental epistemic aims of education: e.g., should the focus be on "the development of true belief, justified belief, understanding, some combination of these, or something else?" (Siegel 2010, 5). More detailed discussions on this can be found, e.g., in Robertson (2010), Baehr (2020), and Marabini and Moretti (2020).

thereby the epistemic character and goals of higher education overall, as well as the epistemic character of those studying *within* these very institutions. Here, I focus specifically on the latter issue.

According to Lukianoff and Haidt (2015), we "got here" because the current generation of young adults were raised in the spirit that "adults will do everything in their power to protect you from harm, not just from strangers but from one another as well." Specifically, iGen (the generation following the "millennials"), grew up more shielded, managed, and *coddled* (Lukianoff and Haidt 2018). This is, so they argue, part of the reason why young adults' mental health is getting worse. University students specifically "seem to be reporting more emotional crisis; many seem fragile, and this has surely changed the way university faculty and administrators interact with them" (Lukianoff and Haidt 2015).[6] In their 2018 book they double down on this diagnosis by identifying three "great untruths" young people are taught: (1) the untruth of fragility (What doesn't kill you makes you weaker), (2) the untruth of emotional reasoning (Always trust your feelings), and (3) the untruth of us versus them (Life is a battle between good people and evil people). Since (3) is not directly relevant to the discussion of trigger warnings, the following will focus on *untruths* (1) and (2):

With (1), Lukianoff and Haidt (2018, 22) suggest that the tendency to teach children that "failures, insults, and painful experiences will do lasting damage is harmful in and of itself. Human beings *need* physical and mental challenges and stressors or we deteriorate." Drawing on the work of the statistician and stock trader Nassim Nicholas Taleb (2007, 2012), they argue that we should think of certain things in life as *antifragile*. *Antifragility* means that many important systems (like the economic market or our immune systems) *require* stressors and challenges so they can learn, adapt, and grow (Lukianoff and Haidt 2018, 22–24). The same goes for our *minds*: "Given that risks and stressors are natural, unavoidable parts of life, parents and teachers should be helping kids develop their innate abilities to grow and learn from such experiences" (23). According to Lukianoff and Haidt, instead of preparing children *for* the road, we clear it of anything that might upset them. Trigger warnings are part of this problem.

This leads to (2)—namely that iGen is falsely led to believe that emotional reasoning is (always) reliable, while in actuality, it can "distort reality, deprive us of insight, and needlessly damage our relationships. Happiness, maturity, and enlightenment require rejecting the *Untruth of Emotional Reasoning* and learning

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[6] They don't consider that increased reporting of mental health is partly due to a wider recognition of mental health issues and a (slow) lowering of stigma surrounding it. They also don't take into account how increasing poverty, student debt, and other political issues will inevitably worsen one's mental health.

instead to *question* our feelings" (Lukianoff and Haidt 2018, 34).[7] Lukianoff and Haidt quote insights from cognitive behavioral therapy to support their claim that in order to *heal* or get better, we need to *confront* ourselves with the very things that make us feel badly (34–36). Trigger warnings (alongside a focus on microaggressions) are part of the mechanisms that encourage cognitive distortions like overgeneralization or catastrophizing (2018, 37–38; Lukianoff and Haidt 2015).

We can summarize the coddling argument as follows:

> Trigger warnings *coddle* because they signal to people that they can *expect to be protected from difficult material* and "have the right not to be offended." They *enable avoidance behavior*, because through trigger warnings, *people can hide from contents* they find difficult or problematic or which they disagree with, accelerating *closed-mindedness*. This has an infantilizing effect, preventing important learning experiences and stunting the ability to *know* the world in a realistic way.

This view has relevance in light of the epistemic goals of higher education, as outlined above. Certain educational aims, including the goal to support the positive development of students' epistemic character, might be prevented or blocked *by* the use of trigger warnings. As such, according to CA, trigger warnings have *epistemically corrupting* character.

Following Ian James Kidd (2019, 221), educational institutions have a *corrupting* character when, rather than "cultivating virtues of the mind, certain forms of education lead to the development of the vices of the mind." Not only are epistemic virtues prevented from developing, but conditions arise "that are conducive to the development and exercise of epistemic vice(s) by agents whose formation and agency

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[7] The authors don't consider how judgments about emotional reasoning are often deeply connected to gendered and racist prejudices. E.g., women, queer and black people, and people of colour, as well as those positioned along intersections of these identities, have always been asked "to be more rational," asked "to calm down" and accused of emotional reasoning. This stands in contrast to the rational, objective (white) man. Moreover, there are important differences in how, e.g., white and black women are seen as emotional (with the former often described as fragile and in need of protection, and the latter often seen as aggressive and angry). See Trina Jones and Kimberly Jade Norwood (2017) for a discussion of white fragility and the racist "angry black woman" stereotype. See Myisha Cherry (2019) for a discussion on "Gendered Failures in Extrinsic Emotional Regulation," which highlights the complexities of gender as well as race when it comes to the perceptions of emotions.

is shaped by those conditions" (224). According to CA, this is precisely what trigger warnings do: implementing mechanisms like trigger warnings negatively influences the way in which young adults are able to *know* and *make sense* of the social world around them. Instead, students should be equipped "to thrive in a world full of words and ideas that they cannot control" (Lukianoff and Haidt 2015), and aided in developing epistemic virtues—such as open-mindedness, curiosity, or autonomy—to contribute to the pursuit of truth and knowledge (Lukianoff and Haidt 2018, 16, 254). Trigger warnings hinder this and tend to foster epistemic vices in students. It is those epistemic vices I want to look at in more detail in the following.[8]

The Coddling Argument and Epistemic Vices
In his book *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations*, José Medina (2013, 28) talks about how "differently situated subjects and groups accrue different epistemic gains and losses, and how the epistemic advantages and disadvantages become distributed among members of society." His theory builds on insights from feminist standpoint theory (e.g., Grasswick and Webb 2002; Grasswick 2018; Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1991; Wylie 2004) that we ought to understand epistemic subjects as *situated knowers*—the claim that certain domains of our social knowledge are influenced by our *standpoint*, which affects the way in which we act as knowers in the world.

Among other things, Medina is interested in how our epistemic standpoints are connected to epistemic virtues and vices. He understands *epistemic vices* as "a set of corrupted attitudes and dispositions that get in the way of knowledge" (Medina 2013, 29), characterizing them as part of a larger structure of *active ignorance*.[9] As such, an epistemic vice isn't incidental but has systemic character: "Epistemic vices are composed of attitudinal structures that permeate one's entire cognitive life: they

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[8] I focus on how trigger warnings encourage epistemic vices (according to CA), rather than analysing how they prevent epistemic virtues. This is due to the way in which Haidt and Lukianoff frame their claims *about* trigger warnings (e.g., the descriptions of the "Great Untruths," or their focus on the corrupting character of educational practices). But beyond that, one of the most distinct features of epistemic vices is that they obstruct and *prevent* knowledge (Medina 2013, 30; see further discussions in Cassam 2019, 3–5). This seems to be the most distinctive worry of CA when it comes to the epistemic function of trigger warnings.

[9] As Kidd (2019, 226) points out, Medina uses the term "corruption" as part of the *definition* of vices themselves, while in Kidd's discussion, "epistemic corruption" is part of what *causes* vices. Here, these two aspects come together: according to CA, trigger warnings *create an epistemically corrupting situation*, where vices (which can be further understood as corrupted attitudes in Medina's sense) tend to grow.

involve attitudes toward oneself and others in testimonial exchanges, attitudes toward the evidence available and one's assessment of it, and so on" (31). They hinder the capacity to learn and contribute to the pursuit of knowledge, in damaging the social knowledge that *is* available, and limiting chances for improvement (31). An epistemic virtue, on the other hand, is "a character trait that constitutes an epistemic advantage for the individual who possesses it and for those who interact with him or her: roughly, a set of attitudes and dispositions that facilitate the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge" (29–30). Within Medina's theory, both epistemic vices and virtues relate to power structures, privilege, and social positionality. While he makes it explicit that he doesn't want to generalize "*the* epistemic perspective of the oppressed or *the* epistemic perspective of the oppressor" (45), he does point out that those in positions of (material, economic, social) power, who tend to harbor unchallenged privilege, are prone to develop *epistemic vices*, hindering them in developing a clear view of the unfairness and discrimination going on in the world (30–32). On the other hand, those who are marginalized have a somewhat advantaged *epistemic* position (echoing standpoint theory), due to "some critical and demystifying experiences with important consequences for the epistemic character for of those who have them, which can only be found in subordinate groups" (45), while they are, in other ways, in less (materially, economically, socially, etc.) privileged groups.

Applying this to the coddling argument might strike us as odd. To many of us, it might seem intuitive that those who ask for and need trigger warnings will at least *tend* to be situated in the latter group rather than the group of the overly privileged. According to Haidt and Lukianoff, however, proponents of trigger warnings represent a group of people who are used to being coddled by adults, overprotected and left unchallenged (Lukianoff and Haidt 2018, 13–14; 2015), and who *thereby* exhibit a certain form of privilege.[10] It's with this predicament that they enter a *further* corrupting educational system, which makes them, according to CA, more prone to develop epistemic vices and seek out strategies that *entertain* these vices.[11] As I will discuss in the next section, I think that CA is wrong in this assessment. First, however, I want to show in more detail, with Medina, that defenders of CA implicitly claim that trigger warnings encourage the developments of *epistemic vices*.

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[10] The authors acknowledge that young people face many difficult challenges and aren't just "naturally" lazy or spoiled. They do suggest, however, that parents and (educational) institutions overprotect and "coddle" children and *thereby* "set them up for failure"—which results in students further seeking out ways to keep up this protection (Lukianoff and Haidt 2018, 13).

[11] I want to thank an anonymous referee for urging me to clarify the points laid out here.

Medina lists three central epistemic vices—(a) epistemic arrogance, (b) epistemic laziness, and (c) closed-mindedness. Somebody might develop (a) *epistemic arrogance*, a "cognitive self-indulgence or cognitive superiority complex" (Medina 2013, 32), if they are never challenged, confronted, or held accountable for their mistakes. Epistemic arrogance expresses itself, subsequently, as a certain tendency in viewing one's epistemic life and that of others (32). "The external world has been swallowed up by the all-encompassing perspective of the arrogant subject who does not recognize any other authoritative perspective" (33). Even in less drastic cases, it will result in an accumulation of problematic biases and unchallenged stereotypes (33).

This seems to fit with the way defenders of CA describe those who demand trigger warnings in the name of protecting people: they argue that proponents of trigger warnings think that their view is all-encompassing, and that they are entitled to alter the world in ways that suit them—in Lukianoff and Haidt's (2015) words, that they have the "right not to be offended." This has bad consequences for the antifragile mind, which is distinctively expressed via Lukianoff and Haidt's (2018) untruths of fragility and emotional reasoning: as they argue, we *need* to be confronted and challenged to grow and thrive and need to learn that our emotions are often misguided and distorted. This is directly cut off by encouraging the use of trigger warnings, they say: trigger warnings give the impression not only that we won't *have* to be challenged but also that we don't have to *accept* or even *encounter* other perspectives.

Next, somebody is (b) *epistemically lazy* if they are unwilling to see or embark on the necessity to confront themselves with issues challenging their privilege, ignorance, or comfort. As Medina (2013, 34) points out, it surely isn't a new phenomenon that oppression is "literally put out of sight to protect some members of the privileged class, either because they are depicted as unable to handle it, or just to spare them unnecessary 'troubles.'" This way, some people can "often ignore the most violent and hard-to-swallow aspects of social confrontation" (34). We talk about *laziness* here, because these subjects are blameworthy in their ignorance. They *could* know better, and they *should* know better. Connected to this are the two notions of "not needing to know" and "needing to not know" (34). It's a feature of epistemic laziness that some people quite literally *do not need to know* about the horrible inequalities around them, because those inequalities seemingly don't affect them. There is a "lack of curiosity about those areas of life or those domains that one has learned to avoid or not to concern oneself with" (34). *Needing to not know* is slightly different: some literally *need to not know* about inequalities around them in order to *justify* to themselves the privilege they have. This creates "not just areas of epistemic neglect, but areas of an intense but negative cognitive attitude, areas of epistemic hiding—experiences, perspectives, or aspects of social life that require an enormous

amount of effort to be hidden and ignored" (35). An individual *epistemically hides* when they knowingly or unknowingly turn away from having to confront issues that would challenge them.

Again, according to CA, trigger warnings encourage epistemic laziness because they signal that others will do everything to protect them so they don't have to confront themselves with possibly difficult issues (Lukianoff and Haidt 2015). This also plays into the "fragility" crisis Lukianoff and Haidt identify among the younger generation specifically. The overprotection they claim young people are experiencing *discourages* them to actively think about salient issues of our time. As such, epistemic laziness isn't *passive*: applied to trigger warnings, one might argue that they *actively* encourage hiding from "words, ideas, and subjects that might cause discomfort or give offense" (ibid.), supported by the idea that people *don't need to know* about difficult topics. Trigger warnings, then, *literally* put out of sight material people might find difficult, out of the worry that "they won't be able to handle it."

Finally, somebody is (c) *epistemically closed-minded* when their "mental processing remains systematically closed to certain phenomena, experiences, and perspectives, come what may" (Medina 2013, 34). As such, "closed-mindedness erodes reliability, epistemic trust, and one's general capacity to learn" (34). Here, *needing not to know* functions as a defense and avoidance mechanism, which "usually involves the lack of openness to a whole range (no matter how broad or narrow) of experiences and viewpoints that can destabilize (or create trouble for) one's own perspective" (35). Especially "those in a position of privilege are often encouraged to hide their heads in the sand like ostriches with respect to certain aspects, presuppositions, or consequences of the oppression that sustains their privilege" (35). This relates to epistemic hiding: somebody who cultivates these vices, has a way of gathering knowledge about the world that doesn't just close them off from such information but helps them in finding ways *around* it. Again, defenders of CA see these vices encouraged through trigger warnings, in allowing people to avoid difficult material. According to CA, trigger warnings make it incredibly easy for people to look away and put out of sight things that we *should* know about.

Overall, defenders of CA might argue that trigger warnings encourage what Medina calls *active ignorance*. According to Medina (2013, 58), "Active ignorance is the kind of ignorance that is capable of protecting itself, with a whole battery of defense mechanisms (psychological and political) that can make individuals and groups sensitive to certain things, that is, numbed to certain phenomena and bodies of evidence and unable to learn in those domains." It continuously reproduces and reinscribes itself into our minds, practices and institutions. Defenders of CA seem to see a similar danger in trigger warnings: as they see it, already privileged students will actively refuse to engage with difficult topics that could challenge them, and actively seek out practices that enable them to continue this disengagement under the pretext

of protecting people. This ties back in with the *epistemically corrupting* effect trigger warnings have on students when implemented in their educational environment (Kidd 2019, 224): According to CA, trigger warnings tend to create conditions that are *conducive to the development and exercise of epistemic vices* within agents whose agency is shaped by those very conditions.

Viewing CA from this perspective is helpful, because it makes apparent their worries about the domain of knowing. And in fact, making sense of CA's arguments as claims about epistemic vices and corruption might actually raise some doubt about how much good trigger warnings do. It seems clear that in order to fight ignorance, we *do* need to enable people to *know* the world adequately. To hide away and close ourselves off is exactly what we *shouldn't* do. Nevertheless, I think that CA is misguided. In the following, I will take another look at the epistemological implications of trigger warnings and show why CA fails.

3. Where the Coddling Argument Goes Wrong

While defenders of CA seem to recognize that trigger warnings include epistemic demands, they fail to see that these demands come from those *who already know* about the content that is being warned about. If the argument is that people who defend and use trigger warnings are at a higher risk of becoming epistemically arrogant, lazy, or closed off from difficult material, but those who need warnings need them precisely *because* they *already* have intimate knowledge about the material, CA seems to have misunderstood the epistemology of trigger warnings. While Haidt and Lukianoff conceive of students who request trigger warnings as (at least in some ways) overly privileged, I will argue in the following that those who need trigger warnings tend to have been exposed to traumatic experiences like racist, sexist, or transphobic violence, precisely *because* they do not have the benefits certain privileged individuals enjoy.

As we've already seen, according to Medina's (2013, 29) account, "differently situated groups and subjects have different epistemic predicaments: their epistemic deficits are different, and their resources to overcome these deficits and to resist dominant ideologies are also different. *Epistemic oppression is not an equal opportunity institution: it affects all of us, but not all of us equally*." As pointed out before, Medina argues along the lines of feminist standpoint theory, which has a long history in Black feminist thought specifically: for example, theorists like Patricia Hill Collins (2000), bell hooks (1982, 2015) or Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991) have argued that gender needs to be seen in intersections with *other* social identities (like race and class), which form the way in which one experiences the world and is oppressed within it. As Brianna Toole (2019, 598) points out, the broad claim of standpoint theory is that "some nonepistemic features related to an agent's social identity make a difference to what an epistemic agent is in a position to know." Of

primary concern is "the relationship between one's position of marginalization or dominance in a social system and what one can know (or fail to know) given that social positioning" (599). Now, the fact that one inhabits a particular marginalized standpoint doesn't mean that they can't be wrong about things. However, there *are* certain *epistemic advantages* to the position of the marginalized, insofar as they have *privileged* knowledge and understanding about the workings of oppression and are better situated to *recognize* it (600).

Standpoint theory has been criticized for "valorizing the agency of those in the margins," or for "failing to adequately account for phenomenon such as internalized oppression, in which the perspective of the oppressed is damaged by the forces of oppression" (Grasswick 2018, 17). I cannot discuss these issues here but rather want to point out that feminist standpoint theory *does* capture something important about our ways of knowing—namely, that those who inhabit marginalized positions are more likely to have intimate knowledge and understanding of the very things that relate to their marginalization and more likely to have had *certain* experiences, including (though surely not exclusively) certain *traumatizing* experiences.[12] What standpoint theory can capture is the connection between one's social position and one's social knowledge about these very experiences and circumstances. If your social

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[12] When it comes to the connection between positions of social marginalization and trauma, I'm drawing on a large literature in social psychology. Kevin L. Nadal, Tanya Erazo, and Rukiya King (2019, 3) point out that "when people of color experience trauma related to race or ethnicity, they are more likely to undergo behavioral or personality changes that are often pervasive and long-lasting and align with typical symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder." However, the use of rigid definitions of trauma will often leave them undiagnosed, resulting in wrong or ineffective treatments: "People who struggle with pervasive and painful experiences with racism are encouraged to reframe their experience or to 'get over it,' instead of being validated that they are experiencing 'normal' and 'expected' responses to trauma" (4). Their study concludes "that a higher amount of racial microaggressions was associated with a higher number of traumatic symptoms" (11). Similarly, Anahvia Taiyib Moody and Jioni A. Lewis (2019, 208) find that "gendered racial microaggressions were significantly associated with traumatic stress symptoms among Black women," and point to a significant association between the sexual orientation of Black women and traumatic stress symptoms (209). Finally, Andrea L. Roberts et al. (2012), who examined "whether lifetime risk of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was elevated in sexual minority versus heterosexual youth" (1587), find that "sexual minority young adults are at greatly increased risk for lifetime probable PTSD and that a substantial portion of this elevated risk stems from higher exposure to childhood abuse" (1591).

position renders you more vulnerable to certain traumatizing experiences, this influences your *knowledge* (broadly understood) about these very things. Of course, when it comes to trigger warnings, we do need to note that somebody could be very privileged in many regards but still experience a traumatic event like a violent robbery, and could subsequently experience PTSD. But here, too, when we focus on the domain of *knowing about this particular set of circumstances*, we can see that the person who requests and needs trigger warnings will have more intimate knowledge than somebody who has never experienced anything like it. This doesn't mean others can't acquire knowledge about it. But this is an issue separate from judging about the epistemic states of those who request trigger warnings because they *need* them. Once we see that those who are in need of trigger warnings are actually the ones who have a somewhat *better* view of the very contents they need a heads-up about, accusing them of epistemic avoidance, laziness, or arrogance seems to be misguided.

Let's apply this to an example provided in Logan Rae's (2016) article "Refocusing the Debate on Trigger Warnings: Privilege, Trauma, and Disability in the Classroom." Rae, a survivor of sexual assault, describes her encounter with trigger warnings in a training session for resident assistants, which included an hour-long session on sexual assault on campuses:

> Immediately before the session's beginning, we were explicitly warned that the short course was going to be difficult, and assured that we could step out at any moment if necessary (this statement stood in as their trigger warning). The assistant director said, "It is okay if you need to step out to collect yourself, but please do rejoin us as soon as you are able." Not only did the warning alert those of us who had experienced a traumatic event to take care of ourselves, but it also signaled the real world implications of the training session to everyone present. (Rae 2016, 97)

Rae (97–98) describes how she stepped out shortly after the session began—and how, after a few minutes, she was able to collect herself and return to the training session.

Again, let's look at the epistemic vices outlined above.

Recall, that the (a) *epistemically arrogant* subject has something of a superiority complex and is incapable of acknowledging their flaws or a different interpretation of a situation. This arrogance (it's said) expresses itself with trigger warnings, as it functions as a request to change the world to fit one's own beliefs and preferences and not accept other perspectives (e.g., remember the untruths of fragility and emotional reasoning). However, most of the time, making use of trigger warnings isn't motivated by a request to *not* be in touch with something *at all*, or because the person requesting the warning considers themselves to be "above" a

certain topic; rather, it is motivated by a desire to be adequately prepared *in order* to be able to participate and engage (e.g., see Harlow 2016).

The (b) *epistemically lazy* have a tendency to *hide* because they don't want to confront themselves with injustices in our world. Again, the example tells a different story. As Rae (2016, 98) points out, "While I did have a tough time at the beginning of the session, I later felt that I had the choice to 'opt in,' to create new ways to cope with discussions of sexual assault. The trigger warning at the beginning made me feel it was okay to take breaks and pace myself through an overwhelming reminder of my assault." Indeed, the warning was needed *because* Rae *already* had intimate knowledge about the content under discussion: as she points out, we have to consider that "students stepping out of class are not 'missing' or 'avoiding' material—especially since the trauma with which they are struggling is likely a *direct* result of their life experience with the subject matter under discussion" (98). Survivors of sexual assault who briefly leave the room during discussions that relate to their experiences are usually far from incapable of acknowledging that bad, unjust things happen in our world. As we see in our example, Rae doesn't hide—rather, the warning allows her to stay in the room *in the long run*. I'd argue that those who request or need trigger warnings don't say that they "don't need to know" or "need to not know" about this topic—they need a trigger warning exactly because they *do* know about the issue in question.

And the (c) *epistemically closed-minded* person actively seeks cutting themselves off from difficult contents they might disagree with or challenge their privilege ignorance. When we consider our example, it becomes clear why these vices don't apply here. Again, if we consider trigger warnings as support mechanisms to stay in touch with a discussion without being unnecessarily triggered, we see how a warning can enable people to *continue* participation rather than close it off.

Given this, it appears that trigger warnings can *epistemically benefit* an educational environment. As Laguardia, Michalsen, and Rider-Milkovich (2017, 897) or Kate Manne (2015) point out, once you are experiencing PTSD symptoms in, say, a classroom, you *cannot* learn or engage in a productive way anymore. It's important to recognize that trauma and discomfort are not the same. Or, to refer again to Rae (2016, 95): "Students can learn and continue to learn through discomfort. Trauma, on the other hand, does not simply jolt us out of our own perspectives. Trauma completely disrupts our focus and makes learning virtually impossible." An adequate warning, however, can improve the overall situation for affected students and therefore be beneficial to their participation, the sharing of knowledge, and pursuit of research.

Now, it's true that there are a number of people who do ask to not encounter triggering material *at all*. If somebody's PTSD doesn't allow them to be part of the discussion, trigger warnings can help them to exit *before* their symptoms are set off.

Lukianoff and Haidt (2015, 2018) surely are right in pointing out that indefinite avoidance will be counterproductive for survivors, and that therapeutic support is essential to help them live with their trauma. This therapeutic setting, however, usually shouldn't be a classroom or workplace meeting. Given how inaccessible and expensive therapy can be, it is not an unreasonable response for people who suffer from panic attacks to try to avoid their triggers *until they can get further support*. Moreover, *if* people decide to leave a meeting or classroom, their being *able* to leave at that point could ensure better epistemic participation in the long run. Being confronted with triggering material without warning might lead to some people leaving indefinitely. Again, in such situations, a simple warning could help to create an *epistemically better* situation and avoid cutting somebody off completely.

Regina Rini (2020, 173–75), when talking about Lukianoff and Haidt's assessment of microaggressions, points out (among other things) that the authors ignore the systematics of oppression and power dynamics and how they affect different people in different ways. Similar things can be said about CA. If we consider the logic of how knowledge and power operate in a political world, we can see *what* defenders of CA get wrong about the epistemology of trigger warnings: people need trigger warnings precisely because they *already know* what is being warned about. And often, they are more likely to already know these things because of the position they inhabit in society. If defenders of CA argue that trigger warnings will lead people to avoid difficult topics—obscuring not only more detailed discussions but also a very general "knowing that certain things are happening in our world"—their claims seem to be misguided given that people already know about the things that are happening. Similar things can be said about their claims that trigger warnings limit "confrontation with things we are afraid of," given that trigger warnings are, in most cases, a support mechanism that allows one to be able to stay in touch with certain topics *without* being triggered.

There is surely a limit to what trigger warnings can do. Expecting them to fully heal or eliminate trauma would be unreasonable. But, unlike what CA suggests, those who ask for trigger warnings (usually) don't expect them to do these things. People suffering from PTSD will typically be quite aware of the fact that trigger warnings won't eliminate negative feelings or make them feel neutral when encountering material that relates to their trauma. Instead, proponents of trigger warnings acknowledge that the warnings can function as a "buffer" (Harlow 2016) or "aid" (Laguardia, Michalsen, and Rider-Milkovich 2017, 891–92).

Contrary to active ignorance, one might argue that trigger warnings encourage *active knowledge*. For one, they enable survivors to actively participate and not be cut off. But they also encourage active participation on behalf of those *giving* the trigger warnings: for example, if I prepare a syllabus for a seminar on historical injustice, I need to actively consider what could be worth warning about. I have to

consider what does and doesn't need to be discussed and how I can encourage participation for *everybody*—especially for those who have valuable experiences and knowledge, whose perspective shouldn't be excluded. Using trigger warnings also signals *others* participating in the meeting to be mindful and considerate and to create a space that enables participation.[13]

4. What about *Misuses* of Trigger Warnings; or, Why We Need a Nuanced Practice

The previous discussion showed how trigger warnings *can* contribute to the production of *active knowledge* in facilitating conscious engagement with the presented material. Despite what proponents of CA claim, none of this requires censoring or omitting important material on racism, sexism, transphobia, or ableism in classrooms, activist circles, or workplaces. *However*, it is not unreasonable to think about how even those acts instituted and acclaimed by the marginalized are used (consciously or unconsciously) by some willfully ignorant people to avoid having to confront the wrongs that are happening in our world.[14]

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[13] It should moreover be noted that some participants in a discussion or seminar might need a warning for things that they *don't* have direct knowledge of—not because they have a tendency to withdraw in problematic ways (as discussed more in the next subsection) but because they find some material genuinely upsetting. It's worth pointing out that *of course* some things are simply not easy to look at for *many* people: e.g., seeing a violent image or video will often be difficult, even if we don't have personal experience with the portrayed event. However, this doesn't mean that such individuals are *coddled*; rather, it means that they have an empathetic reaction to difficult material. In fact, this kind of case emphasizes the way in which adequate warnings can also be productive for those who *do not* have related trauma. A warning can support various individuals in their often-complex needs, and this highlights how a nuanced practice of trigger warnings can benefit a community (e.g., a classroom) *overall*. Recognising the need for such warnings for those who don't have direct experience of the traumatic content in question is not a case of coddling; rather, a warning will also allow those who do not have personal knowledge or experience to engage in a more productive way *in general*. Thanks to Quill Kukla, whose questions prompted me to think more about these issues.

[14] I suggest that it's those people whom we should be concerned about, not people who ask for trigger warnings because they need them to help with their PTSD. While one might argue that it could be exactly those whom CA is concerned about, a look at Haidt and Lukianoff's material makes clear that this isn't the case: they do seem to be mainly concerned about those who suffer from PTSD and ask for trigger warnings.

I want to address this issue with an example by Reni Eddo-Lodge in her book *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race*, where she talks about enrolling in a class on the transatlantic slave trade with a new (white) university:

> Neither of us knew quite what to expect. I'd only ever encountered black history through American-centric educational displays and lesson plans in primary and secondary school. . . . But this short university module changed my perspective completely. It dragged Britain's colonial history and slave-trading past incredibly close to home. . . . In a tutorial, I distinctively remember a debate about whether racism was simply discrimination, or discrimination plus power. Thinking about power made me realise that racism was about so much more than personal prejudice. It was about being in the position to negatively affect other people's life chances. My outlook began to change drastically. My friend, on the other hand, stuck around for a couple of tutorials before dropping out of the class altogether. "It's just not for me," she said.
>
> Her words didn't sit well with me. Now I understand why. I resented the fact that she seemed to feel that this section of British history was in no way relevant to her. She was indifferent to the facts. Perhaps to her, the accounts didn't seem real or urgent or pertinent to the way we live now. I don't know what she thought, because I didn't have the vocabulary to raise it with her at the time. But I know now that I was resentful of her because I felt that her whiteness allowed her to be disinterested in Britain's violent history, to close her eyes and walk away. To me, this didn't seem like information you could opt out from learning. (Eddo-Lodge 2018, 1–3)

The white person's behavior demonstrates Medina's epistemic vices in some relevant ways. She made the (arrogant) assumption that this material wasn't of any relevance to her ("I don't need to know this"), epistemically hid and closed her mind from learning more about a historical period that helped build not only the United States but also Britain and Europe as we know it ("I need to not know this"). Of course, much could be said about the failure of recognizing the lasting impact of colonialism (all over the world), but for now I want to direct our attention to something different: While the example doesn't suggest that the lecturer gave trigger warnings, one might claim that *had* they been given at the beginning of the course or in the syllabus, Eddo-Lodge's acquaintance might have quit much sooner. She might have *misused* these trigger warnings to hide from the material.

This is a possibility—and, as I said before, it's surely not a new phenomenon that people do epistemically turn away from learning about topics like racism, sexism, transphobia, ableism, and so on. But this example highlights as well that, *regardless* of the presence of trigger warnings, that person managed to epistemically hide from the material. This, I think, is an important lesson for defenders of CA because it shows that the omission of trigger warnings will not *solve* the fact that some people will try to avoid learning about certain things.

I've already mentioned above, referring to Rae (2016, 95), that discomfort, distinct from trauma, can be an important aspect of learning environments.[15] This point is crucial. Barbara Applebaum (2017, 864), in an article entitled "Comforting Discomfort as Complicity,"[16] addresses this specifically when asking "how can social-justice educators support white students to *stay with* rather than *flee from* the discomfort that is necessary for learning and without appeasing or pacifying their discomfort and without providing absolution and redemption?" She quotes Erinn Gilson (2014, 76), whose characterization of *invulnerability* can be understood as the performance of a position enabling us "to ignore those aspects of existence that are inconvenient, disadvantageous, or uncomfortable for us, such as vulnerability's perspective. As invulnerable, we cannot be affected by what might unsettle us." According to this, white students stress their "invulnerability" in communicating that they don't want to, and think they *don't have to*, learn about their white privilege and the horrors whiteness can inflict on students of color—and structure their engagement accordingly: "Invulnerability enables one to ignore what is uncomfortable, to ignore that vulnerability is a fact of life" (Applebaum 2017, 870). This means that "if invulnerability entails closure and not wanting to know, epistemic vulnerability begins with being open and an acknowledgement of uncertainty" (870).

I point this out because I think that trigger warnings can help us challenge what Applebaum and Gilson outline as invulnerability by *encouraging* active engagement with certain contents, if they are given in a way that *unmasks* the tendency of avoidance (like Eddo-Lodge's friend). A teacher could point out that they understand how contents on slavery and colonialism could be triggering particularly for those who experience racism (and that those students should take care of themselves throughout this class and can come speak to the teacher), and that it will be uncomfortable and troubling to find out about these issues for others. They could also point out that those students shouldn't give in to the tendency to look away because learning about racism is essential, specifically for those who aren't experiencing it themselves.

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[15] More discussion on the educational and moral potential of discomfort can be found in Munch-Jurisic (2020).

[16] Many thanks to an anonymous referee for pointing me to this source.

Some students might still leave this class or never attend in the first place. But it's likely that they would do that anyways, trigger warning notwithstanding. Importantly though, an adequate and nuanced warning can lay the tendency of *actual* withdrawal from difficult material out in the open (e.g., a warning might make a student aware that their feeling of "it's just not for me" isn't necessarily *neutral*). This could encourage *active knowledge*—not only in the sense that there is active confrontation with often overlooked material, but also in creating awareness about one's own motives. This might motivate some students to reflect on their tendency to withdraw and might lead them to stay in the class. In the spirit of what Applebaum (2017, 872) calls "critical hope," trigger warnings can aim "to encourage openness toward continued struggle," highlight "discomfort as a signal to be alert for what one does not know about others but also about oneself," and "may lead to a willingness to stay in discomfort because discomfort can broaden the limits of one's frame of intelligibility." Likewise, we can see that trigger warnings do not in fact cut off or limit free expression or the exploration of different issues and viewpoints. Given the epistemic goals of higher education discussed above, it does indeed seem important to be able to discuss and challenge various viewpoints one might not encounter otherwise. Rather than standing opposed to that, trigger warnings support this aim: trigger warnings don't prevent anybody from speaking about a particular topic; they warn an audience *what will be spoken about*. This, to my mind, is not the same as censorship or (epistemic) avoidance.[17]

Ultimately, we need to allow for a nuanced practice of trigger warnings. Trigger warnings shouldn't only be imagined as providing "TW" in front of every single piece of content but should rather be seen as making students broadly aware of the kind of material that will be coming up. Manne (2015), for example, points out how giving trigger warnings merely requires "including one extra line in a routine email to the class, such as: 'A quick heads-up. The reading for this week contains a graphic depiction of sexual assault.'" It's about making people broadly aware of the kind of material that will be coming up. In some cases, this might include a willingness to think about what (graphic) material is necessary. This, however, isn't necessarily epistemically bad; rather, it can *encourage* thorough engagement.

We also need to recognize that trigger warnings won't overcome the fact that certain spaces simply *won't* be safe for some people. Brittney Cooper (in an article against trigger warnings) makes an important point along these lines:

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[17] It should be noted that academic freedom and free expression surely are important issues in the context of higher education specifically, and much more could be said about how they relate to trigger warnings (and their epistemic functions). However, that discussion goes beyond the realms of this paper. See some more detailed arguments in James (2017) and Rae (2016).

> Part of what we as educators, parents and students have to recognize is that classroom spaces in which difficult topics like trauma, rape, war, race and sexuality are discussed are already unsafe. When students of color who have endured racism have to hear racially insensitive comments from other students who are in the process of learning, the classroom is unsafe. The classroom is unsafe for trans students who are often referred to by the wrong gender pronoun by both students and teachers. The classroom is unsafe for rape survivors who encountered students in the process of learning why getting drunk at a party does not mean a woman *deserves* to be raped. (Cooper 2014)

I agree with Cooper (ibid.) that learning about these topics is a necessary part of education. While it's true that certain material can be difficult to cope with for people carrying trauma, she is surely right that some people *do* need to know about issues like racist violence, rape culture, and transphobia. These are important points, but we need to realize that it's a misconception to assume that proponents of trigger warnings claim that they make spaces into the *ultimate* safe space. What they can do is *warn*, *aid*, or enable those people who have endured racism or survived rape *to be part of the conversation*. This, again, makes clear the *epistemic benefit* such warnings can have: far from giving rise to an epistemically corrupting educational system, they can help people who have crucial knowledge about these issues to remain part of a discussion, and may even help to *sensitize* others to the fact that there *are* people who have intimate knowledge and experience of the issues ahead.

5. Conclusion

My main goal in this paper was to use Medina's framework of epistemic vices (epistemic arrogance, epistemic laziness, and closed-mindedness) to make sense of the epistemic side of the so-called coddling argument against trigger warnings, as presented by Lukianoff and Haidt. I further used insights from social epistemology to show how CA's implicit claim that trigger warnings epistemically corrupt students by encouraging epistemic vices is misguided: defenders of CA fail to see that the demand for trigger warnings comes from those *who already know* about the content that is being warned about. In most cases, then, the charge that those who use trigger warnings tend to be or become epistemically lazy or arrogant or tend to hide epistemically (i.e., they don't want to engage or think they don't need to engage or learn new, difficult material) doesn't apply precisely *because* they already have the relevant knowledge. I moreover highlighted the possibility of misuses of trigger warnings but argued that embracing a nuanced practice might even allow us to

encourage better epistemic practices, which could help us to *confront* the development of epistemic vices.

I don't claim that this article offers ultimate solutions of how to handle the trigger warning debate. What I attempted to offer is a debunking of the overgeneralizing argument that trigger warnings promote, or are requests for, (epistemic) coddling.[18]

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