

PART III

Safe spaces

The Enlightenment conception of the Open Society

16. Generation Wuss?

One might expect Bret Easton Ellis, author of *American Psycho*, to have no truck with the overly sensitive. How else would he have been able to think himself into the headspace of a chainsaw-wielding psychopath? And there's some truth to that: Ellis attracted a fair bit of attention over his critical comments in a *Vice* interview, where he complained about what he saw as the excessively delicate nature of the Millennials, who he dubbed "Generation Wuss". In a later follow-up piece published in *Vanity Fair*, he elaborated on why he thought that the Millennials had a number of traits that made them not as robust as his own Generation X. What collection of traits was Ellis concerned with? Here's a brief list:

My huge generalities touch on their over-sensitivity, their insistence that they are right despite the overwhelming proof that suggests they are not, their lack of placing things within context, the overreacting, the passive-aggressive positivity, and, of course, all of this exacerbated by the meds they've been fed since childhood by over-protective 'helicopter' parents mapping their every move.

If his characterisation is correct, one problem is that the Millennial attitude isn't well-adapted to a Hobbesian world where life is "nasty, poor, brutish and short". The overly sensitive nature of Generation Wuss, said Ellis, leaves them exposed and vulnerable and less able to negotiate an unfriendly world. When faced with harsh truths, "Generation Wuss responds by collapsing into sentimentality and creating victim narratives rather than acknowledging the realities of the world and grappling with them and processing them and then moving on."

Setting aside the question of whether Ellis's characterisation of Generation Wuss is correct, there's no doubt that the *zeitgeist* features the idea that younger generations have a lot of "snowflakes". In March 2016, students at Emory University woke up to find "Trump 2016" written in chalk on some sidewalks and walls. One student was quoted as saying, "I think it was an act of violence, I legitimately feared for my life" (Haidt and Haslam 2016). Related to

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the “snowflake” critique is the idea that some people are less willing (although not necessarily less able) to engage with ideas they find unsettling.¹ Examples of this phenomenon have been much talked about, such as the increased use of “trigger warnings” in the classroom, demands for “safe spaces”, moves to “no-platform” controversial speakers, and increased concern about “extremist speech” and its connection to radicalisation.

The demand for safe spaces of various kinds highlights a sense in which the Enlightenment conception of the Open Society is seen as an enemy. This conception involves the free exchange of ideas, marked by participation in the ideal of free inquiry and rational debate and of the willingness to defend the expression of ideas with which one profoundly disagrees.² Is the free exchange of ideas under threat by Generation Wuss, who just can’t cope with troubling ideas? Or does the very characterisation of some people as “snowflakes” disregard legitimate concerns through the use of a disparaging *ad hominem*? As we’ll see, the answer is a little bit of both.

17. Trigger warnings

A “trigger warning” (also known as a “content advisory warning”) is a statement included at the beginning of a text, video, song, or performance alerting people that the content contains material that some might find disturbing. Anyone purchasing music in the US from 1985 onwards would be familiar with warning labels from the Parents Music Resource Center, alerting the consumer that the content might be objectionable.¹ Television programmes often include notices warning that the content might be unsuitable for younger viewers, and various film boards around the world rate films as suitable for certain groups based on local cultural criteria. All of these can be seen as trigger warnings of varying degrees of usefulness.

There has been considerable discussion about the use of trigger warnings in the classroom. This reached a high point in 2015 with the publication in *The Atlantic* of an essay by Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt titled “The Coddling of the American Mind” (extended to a book in 2018). In that essay, the authors link the movement urging trigger warnings with the idea of turning campuses into “safe spaces” where students are “shielded from words and ideas that make some uncomfortable”. They connect this movement with an underlying psychological attitude, which they call “vindictive protectiveness”, that “seeks to punish anyone who interferes with that aim, even accidentally”. This movement and the culture it seeks to create, they claim, poses a *significant danger* (their phrase) to the quality of American universities and scholarship. Heady stuff.

What’s the concern about trigger warnings? Let’s begin by acknowledging some perfectly legitimate uses of trigger warnings. If you are about to show a video containing flash photography or strobe effects in a lecture, you *should* tell people in advance. Why? Because flash photography and strobe effects can trigger seizures in people with photosensitive epilepsy. Warning people about the content of a video containing strobe effects isn’t mollycoddling students, it’s simply being a responsible educator by trying to prevent avoidable harm that is not required by the learning process.

As a general principle, I think that’s one we can all get behind – one should try to prevent avoidable harm that is not required by the learning process. That principle is one reason it’s no longer acceptable to beat students who fail a test. The difficulty is that, as with all general principles, people can reasonably disagree on how to interpret every one of the key terms in it.

In saying that one “should try to prevent” harm in certain contexts, there is an implicit cost-benefit calculation in the background. One only need to take

reasonable steps to prevent harm and not do everything possible, because that would not be cost-effective. I *will* mention that a video I am about to show contains strobe lighting, but I *won't* check all the video cables in the lecture theatre, even if a loose video cable could cause effects visually similar to strobe lighting.

There's also a debate to be had about what constitutes *harm*.² Part of what underlies the debate over trigger warnings and safe spaces is a disagreement about the concept of harm and what harms educators should work to prevent. The difficulty here is that talking about harm will move us very quickly from *universally* recognised harms (such as seizures) to *generally* recognised harms (such as post-traumatic stress disorder)³ to notions of harm that are more controversial (such as microaggressions).⁴ I'll return to the issue of harm and microaggressions below, as they appear prominently in the critique made by Lukianoff and Haidt.

Finally, in our purported principle, there is the question of whether some harms are required by the learning process. The unpleasant physicality of basic training is a requirement of joining the military because a certain threshold of fitness is required for being a soldier. If you find calculus boring and tough, you are just going to have to cope if you want to become a physicist. Any course in international relations requires a person to get to grips with a sea of acronyms regarding international organisations. It seems that, occasionally, some learning does require having unpleasant experiences. But harm, though?

One worry people express about trigger warnings is that once you start listing things people might find upsetting, it's hard to know where to stop. This is illustrated by examples such as the following: requests that *The Great Gatsby* feature trigger warnings for "suicide", "domestic abuse", and "graphic violence", and students reading Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* be warned that the novel is "a triumph of literature that everyone in the world should read. However, it may trigger readers who have experienced racism, colonialism, religious persecution, violence, suicide, and more."⁵ Other examples, noted by Lukianoff and Haidt (2015), include Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (with warnings about "suicidal inclinations") and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (with warnings about "sexual assault").

All things considered, worrying about where to stop when listing warnings is a pretty minor one for the following reasons. First, few people suggest trigger warnings are supposed to be *exhaustive* – just an exercise in basic common sense about things people might find deeply troubling. Second, when it comes to identifying things people "might find deeply troubling", a natural benchmark already exists – a benchmark that educators should already be aware of, given the duty of care we have towards our students – established for diagnosing the condition of post-traumatic stress disorder. This is a clinically recognised mental disorder that has a fairly specific set of diagnostic criteria. Here is the list of stressors and intrusive symptoms, as listed on the website for the *US Department of Veterans Affairs* (not an organisation that can be plausibly said to pander to snowflakes):

Criterion A (one required): The person was exposed to: death, threatened death, actual or threatened serious injury, or actual or threatened sexual violence in the following way(s):

- Direct exposure
- Witnessing the trauma
- Learning that a relative or close friend was exposed to a trauma
- Indirect exposure to aversive details of the trauma, usually in the course of professional duties (e.g., first responders, medics)

Criterion B (one required): The traumatic event is persistently re-experienced in the following way(s):

- Intrusive thoughts
- Nightmares
- Flashbacks
- Emotional distress after exposure to traumatic reminders
- Physical reactivity after exposure to traumatic reminders

(I omit criteria C through H for reasons of brevity.) If we just focus on those conditions that are part of a clinically recognised medical disorder for which reasonable adjustments should be made, we already have a decent list of subjects to flag: physical or sexual violence, death, and serious injury. That's not too many nor difficult to identify texts where those feature.

Furthermore, this just adds to a pre-existing list of things that instructors already need to consider as part of their duty of care towards students. For instance, students with visual or hearing impairments need to have materials provided to them meeting accessibility requirements. Students with certain medical conditions are given rest breaks when taking exams to allow them to perform at their full capacity. We adjust the teaching calendar so as to accommodate different religious traditions. More recently, the growing recognition of neurodiversity has caused instructors to reflect on whether the traditional lecture-based mode of education is really the best for all students. (It's not.) The debate about trigger warnings thus needs to be situated within the wider context of how best to teach people with diverse backgrounds and complex circumstances but who are all there to learn.

I think there's another important point to keep in mind, one often overlooked – many of these “warnings” would be unnecessary if students were presented with an informative syllabus including not only the author and the title of the text but also a brief explanation of what they were being asked to read and why. Would anyone object to the notice about Achebe's novel if it had been phrased as follows: “This novel is a triumph of literature that everyone

in the world should read because of its relevance for understanding racism, colonialism, religious persecution, violence and death.” That minor reformulation doesn’t explicitly use the words “trigger warning”, but it makes it clear what some of the content of the book is and, hence, the frame of mind one should have when approaching the text. This is simply a matter of managing expectations.

Another argument I’ve heard regarding trigger warnings is that their use interferes with academic freedom regarding teaching pedagogy. The difficulty with this argument is that the number of instances where there are good pedagogical reasons for not informing students, in advance, of what they will be exposed to are few. I imagine that classes in creative writing or in film school will benefit from having students approach material from a state of complete ignorance. After reading a novel or watching a film, students could discuss the theory and methods that made those particular pieces of work so effective. But how often will that kind of issue arise in the natural or social sciences, or philosophy, for that matter?

I suspect that part of what underlies the visceral rejection of trigger warnings is that they partially invert the traditional power dynamic of the classroom. Student need, not faculty interests, are seen as determining or influencing (in part) how content should be presented, which directly challenges those traditionally in power and control of the classroom. But, if so, this seems to ignore the basic point of education, which is to facilitate student learning. If a practice helps facilitate student learning by allowing them to engage more fruitfully with challenging material, what is wrong with that?

I think the real worry people have about trigger warnings is what we might call the *Bartleby objection*, after Herman Melville’s short story, *Bartleby the Scrivener*, published in 1853. The story concerns a newly hired clerk who increasingly refuses to do work, saying only, “I would prefer not to” as his reason. The Bartleby objection, then, is that trigger warnings provide a means by which students can opt out of engaging with certain content they deem offensive, troubling, or upsetting. Rather than read an assigned text on a certain topic, a student can instead say, “I would prefer not to”, on the grounds that it would upset them. Regardless of whether alternative work is assigned in its place, the resulting intellectual package is *different* from that originally intended, and the lesson is not the same. That could be an important difference.

One reason this concern feels compelling is that much of what people learn at university *can* be offensive, troubling, or upsetting – especially when it challenges us to rethink deeply held beliefs or confront unpleasant facts that we would otherwise not encounter. But the mere fact something is upsetting is not, on its own, sufficient reason for refusing to engage with the material. What matters is *why* something is upsetting. We need to work through several different reasons why material may be upsetting, as there are different responses that are required.

First, let's acknowledge that learning about the Holocaust, genocide, ethnic cleansing, wars, crime, social deviance, mental disorders, racism, the horrors of slavery and colonialism, and so on, is upsetting because those are nasty and horrid facts about the world. Learning about them does force one to engage with disturbing ideas. But there are good reasons why we ask students to do so. Knowing about history and the many horrid injustices that have occurred is necessary for both trying to avoid them in the future and to try to make amends, where possible. This is part of helping people to become informed citizens able to participate in a well-functioning society. A willingness to engage with ideas that one might find troubling is part of the deal one makes when one goes to university.

A second reason why material might be upsetting is because it contradicts the deeply held beliefs of a person. For example, when I was in high school, a deeply religious fellow student objected to studying evolution because it contradicted his religious beliefs. The teacher held his ground and informed the student that if he didn't know the material on evolution and wasn't able to answer the questions related to it in the exam, he would receive a lower grade. The student eventually relented and passed the test, although I strongly suspect that he only went through the motions of learning evolutionary theory rather than adopting any beliefs. The point here is that the mere fact a person has religious or other ideological beliefs that are contradicted or questioned by the material being taught shouldn't count as a reason for opting out. A flat-earther in an astronomy class (or someone who believes the Earth is only 5,000 years old in a geology class) can't get special permission to opt out due to his or her incorrect beliefs. Yet the reason why it is appropriate to deny the opt-out here is that the conflict between individual beliefs and the taught material is one that can be approached while remaining intellectually detached. Someone who deeply believes God exists should still be able to study arguments for why God doesn't exist without feeling personally threatened. If they cannot, that's an important diagnostic tool in assessing the mental fragility of the person.⁶

Where things get complicated is when it isn't possible to maintain intellectual detachment from the material. As a third case, imagine a student who had recently been raped and, hence, objects to being asked to read Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* in a literature class as it contains multiple descriptions of rape and sexual violence. This strikes me as a reasonable instance of when an opt-out should, in principle, be allowed. Unless one is specialising in the work of Alice Walker or writing a PhD thesis about the importance of *The Color Purple* in American literature, it isn't *necessary* to read *The Color Purple*. It could be possible to arrange for an alternative assignment. In this case, I think using a trigger warning with an opt-out permitted would be perfectly acceptable and possibly even required out of a duty of care.

As a fourth case, imagine a Black American taking a course on the history of the slave trade, or a Hispanic person taking a course on immigration in the US after 1950. These examples are ones I assume where intellectual detachment is also likely to be difficult, but where the reactions are likely to be

less immediately *visceral* than in the third case. The texts read would likely contain statements that attack, devalue, depersonalise, or otherwise disrespect the racial, ethnic, or social group to which the student belongs and thus might seem candidates for trigger warnings. But, here, the issue about trigger warnings seems *unlikely to arise* in the first place. How could someone take a course on the history of the slave trade without knowing that the course content would contain potentially offensive material given historic attitudes of racism, colonialism, and so on? Regardless of whether trigger warnings are used or not, the difference between the third and fourth case seems to be the following: there are perfectly valid reasons for *why* the materials might be found upsetting in both cases, but that it would be possible, through appropriate classroom management techniques, to introduce and contextualise the materials in the fourth case so as to create an overall positive learning experience.⁷

From this, I conclude that even the Bartleby objection to the use of trigger warnings is largely a non-issue. People take courses because they generally *want* to read and engage with the texts on offer. In those instances where trigger warnings prompt concern and requests for an opt-out, they either yield helpful information about the person revealing other aspects of concern (case two), a legitimate issue that needs to be handled appropriately (case three), or instances where greater care needs to be exercised in the presentation, contextualisation, and explanation of the pedagogical reasons underlying the choice of material (cases one and four).

That said, what if a student *were* to follow Bartleby and sincerely assert “I would prefer not to” when presented with a text, and none of the four cases discussed previously applies? What is the appropriate response? On one hand, this goes against the spirit of the Enlightenment conception of the Open Society. On the other, it would seem to follow from the minimal core discussed in Chapter 4 that we should respect the right of a person to choose to go their own way. The solution to this apparent conflict is to note that this is one instance where the perfect duty of non-interference applies. Choosing to attend university is analogous to entering a new community, a community of scholars, and that means that a student agrees to follow certain rules about the terms of engagement with material, at least initially.⁸ The university cannot force a person to engage with material when they refuse; but when they do, the informal contract between the person and the university is broken. The person has the freedom to go their own way, but doing so will either mean a life outside the university or a life with a worse grade on their transcript.

Educational organisations, whether they be schools, colleges, or universities, are dedicated to cultivating a life of the mind and an attitude of critical rationalism. If the goal is to educate students as best as possible and help them become well-informed, resilient, and robust, then judicious use of trigger warnings is just another tool in the pedagogical toolkit. Can they be misused? Sure, but *everything* can be misused. You can die from drinking too much water. Everything in moderation.

18. Safe spaces

Let us now turn to safe spaces. Lukianoff and Haidt saw trigger warnings as part of a broader movement seeking to generate spaces where students are “shielded from words and ideas that make some uncomfortable.” I think there’s a lot more to the idea of safe spaces than just words and ideas. It also involves addressing behaviours that are sexist, racist, homophobic, transphobic, and bullying or harassing, and how to deal with environments that are shaped, directly or indirectly, by the legacies of colonialism, slavery, and great economic and social inequality.¹ The issue of safe spaces not only concerns how we seek to address past injustices, some of them deeply embedded in structural and cultural aspects of society, but also how we adjudicate disputes between groups of people acting within their legal rights, yet at the same time, who have radically divergent attitudes about what constitutes acceptable norms of speech and behaviour. In short, how do we negotiate the collision of horizons that inevitably takes place in diverse societies?²

There are a number of different ideas that fall under the term “safe space” and can easily be conflated. Here are a few: (i) classrooms or seminar rooms should be environments where people do not feel uncomfortable, insecure or threatened; classroom discussions need to be held in an environment of mutual respect and understanding; (ii) universities (or other quasi-autonomous groups, such as student organisations) should quash racism, sexism, and all of the other -isms that are anathema to a modern and tolerant society; (iii) universities (or other organisations) should provide certain spaces, as part of public events, that people can go to if they find the event disturbing; or (iv) universities should make campus a space where no one feels threatened, unsettled, or uneasy; they should aim to provide an environment where everyone feels at home and welcome. The key question is this: *where* should be safe, *for whom*, and *from what*?

Despite the discussion of safe spaces being formulated as if it was a recent invention, the idea has existed for a while. The concept of “safe spaces” can be traced back to at least second-wave feminism when a shift in focus occurred from the pursuit of explicit political ends (the right to vote, the right to own property, and so on) to broader social matters. One part of widening participation in the feminist movement involved what became known as “consciousness-raising” sessions; these were meetings, typically only involving women, where they could congregate and discuss matters of mutual interest and concern. These “safe spaces” provided an environment where women

could not only speak freely but, through the sharing of experiences, realise how individual experiences fit into a larger pattern of structural oppression.

One thing that's interesting about the consciousness-raising sessions of second-wave feminism is that they were *explicitly* conceived of as an arena of protected discourse, a "safe space". But other important examples of safe spaces existed prior to that, even if people didn't explicitly conceive of them in that manner. Prior to the decriminalisation of homosexuality in the US and elsewhere, gay bars provided a similar function. In their history of gay culture around San Francisco Bay, Stryker and Van Buskirk (1996) observe, "A gay bar was like a hothouse for nurturing and building a sense of community in a time when there were no gay newspapers or other social centers."

From this perspective, one uncontroversial sense of a "safe space" is simply a place where people sharing common interests can meet in an environment shielded from people outside the group who do not share those interests. Although being able to negotiate a diverse society with people having views different from one's own is important, as we saw in Chapter 4 it's important for a group to be able to meet on its own. That is how groups can reflect on their nature and purpose and mobilise to pursue certain ends. It also provides a place where people can explore how their individual identity relates to that of the group. In this way, the Republican and Democratic National Primaries function as a safe space. In the UK, meetings of Green, Labour, Tory, or UKIP activists are similar kinds of spaces. And what is the annual meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos other than a safe space for elites?

On this understanding, a safe space is nothing controversial or unusual. Clubs and societies have always had spaces for their members to meet. Yet one crucial feature of these examples is that clubs and societies are institutionalised entities, ones recognised by the wider society – or, at least, those in power – as entities worth supporting (or, at least, not worth suppressing). Hence, the need for such spaces to be "safe" was never really an issue, for these groups, even if marginalised, were not perceived by their members to be under threat.³ There are a number of instances where things become more complicated. As a crude first attempt to articulate some ideal types, consider the following: (i) when the group, although recognised by the larger society,⁴ experiences an imbalance of power with respect to a number of other groups;⁵ (ii) when the group is recognised by the wider society, but only as a liminal entity;⁶ and (iii) when the group is inchoate, and hence not recognised by the wider society and perhaps not even by its members who understand their identity relative to the group as though through a glass, darkly.⁷

Keeping these ideal types in mind, let us now turn to consider three cases where discussions over safe spaces entered the public consciousness. Each of these cases attracted considerable media attention and, sometimes, considerable secondary commentary. The first case examines the student protests that took place at Yale University during Halloween 2015, initially prompted by an email reflecting on a recent recommendation to be considerate when choosing a costume. These protests led to the resignation of the Head and Associate

Head of Silliman College. The second case examines the student protests at the University of Missouri during the latter half of 2015 following a series of racial incidents. These protests led to the resignation of the University of Missouri System President Tim Wolfe and the Chancellor of the Columbia branch of the University of Missouri, Richard Loftin. The third case examines the decision to offer a special room “equipped with cookies, coloring books, bubbles, Play-Doh, calming music, pillows, blankets and a video of frolicking puppies, as well as students and staff members trained to deal with trauma” (Shulevitz 2015) to anyone who might feel traumatised when Wendy McElroy spoke at Brown University in November 2014. Although these events are a little dated, they are worth considering in some detail, in my opinion, because of the disconnect between how they were represented in much of the media and competing interpretations.

In the autumn of 2015, the Intercultural Affairs Committee at Yale circulated an email asking students to be sensitive when considering their Halloween costumes. In particular, the email pointed out that certain items, such as turbans, feathered headdresses, and blackface, might be seen as culturally insensitive. There had been previous instances of white students wearing blackface during Halloween within the past few years (see Cox and Love 2007), contributing to concerns about racism on campus. Shortly after the email was circulated, Erika Christakis, the Associate Head of Silliman College and a lecturer, sent an email questioning the advice from the Intercultural Affairs Committee. Her email was lengthy, reflective, and carefully written (I suggest you track down a copy on the internet). Near the end of the email, she quoted the Head of Silliman College (her husband):

Nicholas says, if you don't like a costume someone is wearing, look away, or tell them you are offended. Talk to each other. Free speech and the ability to tolerate offence are the hallmarks of a free and open society.

This email was not received well. Despite the inclusion of a number of self-effacing remarks, such as “I don't wish to trivialize genuine concerns about cultural and personal representation” and “I don't, actually, trust myself to foist my Halloweenish standards and motives on others,” a student group was formed in protest. People argued to remove both Erika and Nicholas from campus. One video featuring a group of students surrounding and shouting at Nicholas went viral. In that video, a student can be heard saying: “In your position as master, it is your job to create a place of comfort and home for the students who live in Silliman. You have not done that. By sending out that email, that goes against your position as master. Do you understand that?!” When Nicholas Christakis disagreed, the student responded vitriolically,

Then why the fuck did you accept the position?! Who the fuck hired you?! You should step down! If that is what you think about

being a master you should step down! It is not about creating an intellectual space! It is not! Do you understand that? It's about creating a home here. You are not doing that!

Much of the discussion in the media was highly critical of the students. Consider the following excerpt from *The Atlantic*:

The Yale student appears to believe that creating an intellectual space and a home are at odds with one another. But the entire model of a residential college is premised on the notion that it's worthwhile for students to reside in a campus home infused with intellectualism, even though creating it requires lavishing extraordinary resources on youngsters who are already among the world's most advantaged. (Friedersdorf 2015b)

It continued:

According to *The Washington Post*, 'several students in Silliman said they cannot bear to live in the college anymore.' These are young people who live in safe, heated buildings with two Steinway grand pianos, an indoor basketball court [...a lot more...] But they can't bear this setting that millions of people would risk their lives to inhabit because one woman wrote an email that hurt their feelings? (Friedersdorf 2015b)

Lastly, after quoting an open letter signed by hundreds of people at Yale stating that "We [students] were told to meet the offensive parties head on, without suggesting any modes or means to facilitate these discussions to promote understanding," the article said:

Yale students told to talk to each other if they find a peer's costume offensive helplessly declare that they're unable to do so without an authority figure specifying 'any modes or means to facilitate these discussions,' as if they're Martians unfamiliar with a concept as rudimentary as disagreeing in conversation, even as they publish an open letter that is, itself, a mode of facilitating discussion. (Friedersdorf 2015b)

There's much to say about this. It is true that "the entire model of a residential college is premised on the notion that it's worthwhile for students to reside in a campus home infused with intellectualism." Yet what this does is generate a potential conflict because the campus is trying to perform several functions simultaneously, and these functions, on occasion, have conflicting requirements. Insofar as the campus serves as a *home*, the administration has

duties of pastoral care; insofar as the campus serves as a *university*, the administration has duties of fostering intellectual inquiry. And while residing “in a campus home infused with intellectualism” has many virtues, we must acknowledge that few people want to spend every moment of their lives as if they were in the middle of a debating society, justifying their choices and defending their way of life. At the end of the day, students – just like everyone else – will often want to go *home* to someplace where they can find respite and solace. Providing such a space is part of the duty of pastoral care. The challenge facing residential colleges lies in defining and delineating the boundaries of the home and educational environments. That they occur in close and possibly overlapping spaces does not mean that the boundary does not exist and should not be respected.

I think Erika’s email, and Nicholas’s public statements, went awry in two places. First, there was a lack of appreciation of these two sets of potentially conflicting duties (or, at least, a failure to articulate them) and what was required of them in their role as Associate Head and Head of Silliman College. Since Nicholas was a Professor at Yale, and Erika a lecturer, I suspect they were often used to attending to those duties attached to the educational mission of the university – the fostering of intellectual inquiry. Yet the point of concern lay with their responsibilities acquired while wearing their *other* hat as Head and Associate Head of the college: the duties of pastoral care. This is why the student argued (emphasis added)– “*In your position as master*, it is your job to create a place of comfort and home for the students who live in Silliman.” Rather than being a rejection of the norms and expectations of free inquiry at university, this statement shows students’ awareness of the responsibilities attached to certain institutional roles.

Second, it is important to remember that Yale University is an institution with a history of longstanding racial tensions. One point of concern going back many years was the name of Calhoun College, named after John C. Calhoun, an alumnus of Yale who was a slave owner and a white supremacist.⁸ And it wasn’t just the *name* of the college that upset people, but the images as well – stained-glass windows in the college showed slaves carrying bales of cotton on their heads. It is against this background of concern for racial inclusivity that we must consider the signal sent by the Head of College saying, “If you don’t like a costume someone is wearing, look away or tell them you are offended.” Whereas that could be taken as advice when offered by a friend or a peer, when that is offered by the leading administrator in charge of pastoral care at college, that can *also* be seen as *abdicated* responsibility for enforcing norms of what is appropriate or morally required. I suspect it was this perceived abdication of responsibility, leaving the enforcement of certain norms to the group of people most affected by their violation, which generated outrage.

To see why this second point matters so much, we need to expose a critical underlying assumption of the Head of College’s statement. Universities encourage an egalitarian ethos where all students are social and political equals.

Yet, in reality, no matter how hard a university tries to maintain this noble illusion, it remains a myth. Social and economic inequalities existing outside the university continue to exercise influence inside the university as students carry with them the attitudes and expectations formed prior to arrival. Someone born into a family of great wealth and power and used to acting with impunity will not suddenly change their behaviour upon enrolling. The imperative “if you don’t like a costume someone is wearing, look away or tell them you are offended,” *might* make sense in a situation where all are social equals and where all care about the effect they have on others; but this is rarely the situation in practice. If you are Black and see someone wearing blackface, and you tell them that it offends you, but are met with a brush-off or an insult or worse, that exchange only reinforces your lack of power to rectify racial injustice. This is why, in the open letter, students complained about being told to “meet the offensive parties head on, without [the Head of College] suggesting any modes or means to facilitate these discussions.”

Some interpreted the students’ request for mediation as a curious kind of doublespeak: “Up is down. The person saying that adult men and women should work Halloween out among themselves is accused of infantilizing them” (Friedersdorf 2015b). Yet, on the contrary, I see this as a clear act of *realpolitik* by minority students at Yale. If you are in a minority group attempting to negotiate a hostile environment, you will want to use to your advantage all the institutional levers of power that are available. Given that the First Amendment of the US Constitution permits very few *legal* restrictions on freedom of expression, minority groups who wish to combat racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, and other types of offensive speech or behaviour *need* to be able to invoke institutional procedures when personal expressions of opprobrium fail to curtail the offending behaviour due to First Amendment protections.⁹ That is why the abdication of responsibility was so grating to the students.

What we see then is that this is an incident about safe spaces involving the first kind of ideal type (introduced earlier), which is a group (minority students) recognised by the larger society, but one which experiences an imbalance of power. The kind of safe space the group sought to create was a space where racist or culturally offensive material was prohibited, a desire entirely understandable and appropriate for the home environment of the college. What this incident was *not* about was an attempt to prevent, curtail, or inhibit the discussion of ideas in the *educational environment* of the college. When Erika Christofakis wrote, “American universities were once a safe space not only for maturation but also for a certain regressive, or even transgressive, experience; increasingly, it seems, they have become places of censure and prohibition,” the *safe space* she had in mind was the intellectual, educational, and public space of a university. What she neglected was that, as Associate Head of Silliman College, she was charged with fostering and cultivating the home of the students, a different *kind* of safe space. That distinction matters.

A second case involving safe spaces occurred around the same time in 2015 at the University of Missouri (UM). There, student protests emerged as a result of the convergence of a number of different issues¹⁰, eventually coalescing around long-standing and unresolved grievances about racism on campus. The watershed moment was an incident on 11 September, when racist slurs were yelled at the Missouri Students Association President, Payton Head. A Facebook post he wrote after the event went viral. However, the fact that Richard Lifton, the Chancellor of the University of Missouri-Columbia, didn't respond until six days later (in a message that condemned "bias and discrimination" without using the word "racism") prompted students to hold a "Racism Lives Here" protest on 24 September. Two more "Racism Lives Here" protests were held on 1 October and 11 October. Growing concern about the administration's inability to respond effectively to a number of race-related events led to the student group, Concerned Students 1950 (named after the first year that Black students were admitted to the University of Missouri), to demand the resignation of Tim Wolfe, the president of the entire University of Missouri system. On 24 October, a swastika drawn in faeces in a bathroom of a hall of residence served to highlight the students' concerns – especially since this was the second time in 2015 that anti-Semitic graffiti had appeared in a hall of residence. On 2 November, Jonathan Butler, a graduate student, began a hunger strike, which he claimed would either end in his death or Wolfe's removal from office. After that, events moved quickly. On 4 November, the English Department at UM-Columbia passed a vote of no confidence in Chancellor Lifton by 26-0. On 5 November, the Faculty Council expressed serious reservations about the leadership of both UM-Columbia and the leadership of the University of Missouri system more generally. It seems that these reservations were well-deserved, for in a disastrous interview with students at UM-Kansas City, in response to a request for a definition of "systematic oppression", Wolfe answered: "Systematic oppression is because you don't believe that you have the equal opportunity for success" (Knott and Prohov 2015). People immediately pointed out that this laid the blame for systematic oppression on the *oppressed* because they didn't have the right beliefs. Within hours of this statement, Black football players for the university announced that they would boycott all football-related activities until Wolfe resigned. Despite releasing a public statement on 8 November insisting that he would remain, President Wolfe resigned on 9 November, followed shortly by Chancellor Lifton's resignation.

It was after these two resignations that the issue of safe spaces came to the foreground. A student reporter, Tim Tai, attempted to enter Carnahan quad, which the protesters had turned into their unofficial camp. He was prevented from doing so by protesters forming a human chain, blocking his ability to access the public space. Tai's repeated requests to be able to access the quad and take photographs were denied on the grounds that doing so would be disrespectful to the protesters – the quad was a self-declared safe space. The disagreement soon turned ugly. Amid repeated chants of "No comment", there was scuffling and pushing, with some shouting, "Push them all out!" A video

of the conflict went viral, with perhaps the most striking part being when an assistant professor shouted, “Who wants to help me get this reporter out of here? I need some muscle over here!”

Much of the media coverage was negative. *The Atlantic* wrote: “it is as if they’ve weaponized the concept of ‘safe spaces’” (Friedersdorf 2015a). An editorial in the *New York Post* declared “‘Safe space’ fascists now rule the University of Missouri” (Post Editorial Board 2015). Setting aside the over-the-top rhetoric, there is an important difference between this call for a safe space and that of the students at Yale. Whereas the Yale students wanted to create a space free from offensive *behaviours*, the University of Missouri students wanted to create a space that prevented certain *people* from entering on the grounds that their presence would be disrespectful or upsetting.

What exactly did people find unsettling about this call for a safe space? Was it that certain individuals were banned from entering the quad simply by virtue of belonging to a certain profession without *those individuals* having done anything to warrant exclusion? Or was it the physicality of the exclusion – the shoving, the call for “some muscle over here!” – which raised people’s ire? Or was it also that the quad was a public space that the reporters had a legal right to be able to access, which they were denied?

To begin with, let’s acknowledge that part of how this particular event unfolded was due to the inflamed passions at the time. The shoving and bullying were clearly inappropriate but were also clearly at odds with the overarching aims of the protest, which was meant to combat racial harassment and create a more welcoming and inclusive environment on campus. Once tempers calmed down, the protesters realised this. The group behind the protests, Concerned Students 1950, handed out flyers the next day with the text, “Media has a 1st amendment right to occupy campsite. The media is important to tell our story and experiences at Mizzou to the world. Let’s welcome and thank them!”

That said, it’s also understandable why the protesters reacted to the media with suspicion and wanted to exclude them – the media doesn’t always get the narrative right. With a history of bias in its portrayal of Black communities, many of the protesters had good reason for believing that the media was not to be trusted in covering this story. As Terrell Starr observed in the *Washington Post*, students wanted to create a space free from “the insensitivity they encounter in the news media: Newspapers, Web sites and TV commentary had already been filled by punditry telling Black students to “toughen up” and “grow a pair”. If we reflect on how the students at Yale were portrayed in the media, and how the specific nature of their requests was lost in the resulting furore, it’s not surprising that students at the University of Missouri wanted to exercise greater control over how their protest was reported.

There’s no inconsistency in saying that the crowd’s treatment of Tim Tai was wrong, that the student movement’s attempt to ban the press was unwise (since the resulting negative coverage did more harm than good), *and* that the student movement should have been able to restrict reporters from the “safe

space” on the quad. Reporters in pursuit of a story have a known history of intruding on people in ways that make them uncomfortable. The issue at stake here is essentially how to balance people’s desire to be left alone, even in a public space, with the media’s desire to report on an issue of general concern. That’s a complicated question to answer, and one which I suspect can’t be answered by appealing to a general principle. Cases such as this provide an illustration of the attraction of *moral particularism*: the view that moral judgements depend on all the contextually relevant features of a situation and not general moral principles.

Finally, consider the third case of safe spaces that commanded attention in 2015: Brown University and the recuperation room. In 2014, a student group at Brown invited Jessica Valenti and Wendy McElroy to participate in a debate concerning sexual assault on college campuses. When Katherine Byron, a student member of the Sexual Assault Task Force heard about the scheduled debate, she was concerned about the effect it might have on some people. In an interview with a reporter from *The New York Times* (Shulevitz 2015), Byron expressed particular concern about how McElroy, a libertarian, might be received: “Bringing in a speaker like that could serve to invalidate people’s experiences.”

Out of concern that some might find the debate too much to bear, Byron and a few other students created a room that people could retire to if they found the debate disturbing. The room had “cookies, coloring books, bubbles, Play-Doh, calming music, pillows, blankets and a video of frolicking puppies, as well as students and staff members trained to deal with trauma” (Shulevitz 2015). Over the course of the event, it was estimated that a few dozen people visited the space.

The media’s reaction was generally critical and negative. The *New York Times* article, mentioned above, that reported on the event was titled “In College and Hiding from Scary Ideas,” concisely summarising the reaction of many. Critics charged that the safe space was infantilising and disempowering, and suggested that students were becoming incapable of engaging with ideas challenging their beliefs. If the kind of safe space demanded by the Yale students made sense (e.g., seeking to ban racist and sexist behaviours), and the kind of safe space demanded by the University of Missouri activists was understandable (e.g., attempting to shield protesters from the media), the kind of safe space offered at Brown was, for many, one step too far; this safe space was seen as contrary to the mission of a university – it allegedly provided a place for students to flee to when discomfiting ideas were raised.

To begin with, we need to recognise that describing the room as a place for students to hide from “scary ideas” misrepresents the situation. It wasn’t as though the debate concerned the merits of a flat rate of income tax and the students needed the space because their liberal views about redistribution of wealth were being challenged. The debate concerned the issue of sexual assault on college campuses. It is reasonable to assume that some of the people attending the debate had been sexually assaulted, and among them, there would likely

be variations in terms of their stages of recovery and psychological resilience. Someone might have believed they would be fine listening to the debate, yet react unexpectedly to something that was said. Offering a place where people could go to recover, if necessary, is just a basic act of human decency.

What I think *really* drove people's reactions was the fact that the recovery room was filled with colouring books, Play-Doh, bubbles, and more. Since those items are what children play with, offering the same thing to college students seemed to treat them as children, hence the objection that the safe space was infantilising or disempowering.

It strikes me that there's a condescending and paternalistic element to criticising the contents of the room. The critique assumes that there is a *right way* to deal with emotional trauma and, whatever the right way might be, *that* room didn't provide it. I suspect fewer complaints would have been raised if students upset by the debate chose to deal with it by going kickboxing or to a noisy bar. Yet why are violent sports or drinking seen as more socially acceptable ways of dealing with emotional trauma than a room filled with bubbles and videos of puppies? Is it because engaging in violent sports and drinking, being stereotypically *adult male* ways of responding to stress, are seen as the archetype of acceptable responses? What should really matter in our assessment of that safe space is the effect it had on the people who utilised it. It makes no sense to say, of the space itself, that it was infantilising – something is infantilising only if it brings about the corresponding behavioural changes in people who encounter it. But that is an empirical question. If that space made people feel better and helped them cope, isn't that what counts?

There's another aspect of the media outcry worth noting. Here we have a case of a concerned student making a sincere effort to provide a service for people experiencing emotional stress. Regardless of whether you think that the specific features of the room were appropriate or not, Katherine Byron's desire to help and the action she took was commendable. The vituperative response by the media and on social media only serves to discourage similar good-faith efforts by others in the future – if you try and the mob disapproves, there is hell to pay, so why bother trying?

Recall Mill's defence of "experiments in living" from Chapter 13. We know that safe spaces are social goods playing an important role in society. We also know it's highly implausible to think that we've obtained the optimal design regarding how to structure society and provide social goods (a point I'll return to in the final chapter of the book). Given this, the specific nature of the safe spaces we think society should provide is under continual revision. The *safe spaces* we create depend not only on the kind of *society* we want to have and the kind of harms we want to mitigate, but they also depend on what we *conceptualise* as harms in the first place. Following the argument from Chapter 4, we should encourage experimentation in the kinds of practices used to address harm. If the sharply critical response by the media towards the safe space at Brown reduces future efforts at Brown or elsewhere to try to address harm, then society is worse off as a result.

What about the criticism that the room disempowered students? Here I think it is important to distinguish several different functions that a safe space may provide. Sometimes, a safe space has a *therapeutic* function. Many schools and universities offer quiet rooms where people with social anxiety disorder can go when necessary. The Brown University room functioned as a therapeutic space. Many other examples exist: several colleges at the University of Cambridge have made available rooms with animals to help students cope with exam stress (BBC News 2018). We must recognise that the policies behind these spaces target very real concerns. According to the Office for National Statistics in the UK, approximately 100 students (18 and over) commit suicide each year (Coughlan 2016). In the US, the figure is considerably higher, even controlling for the larger population size, with 7,126 people between 10 and 24 committing suicide in 2021 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2023). These therapeutic spaces are simply one more tool for addressing problems such as these.

Another function of safe spaces is to facilitate political *mobilisation*. Student groups and organisations of activists need spaces to coordinate and plan activities (although the communication abilities provided by the internet mean that much of this can now take place virtually). And, importantly, some spaces are dual-purpose and provide both kinds of functions. Gay bars and the consciousness-raising sessions of the feminist movement are spaces that were *both* therapeutic and facilitators of mobilisation.

The worry that safe spaces like the one offered at Brown serve to *disempower* students only makes sense if the therapeutic function provided crowds out opportunities or the desire for political mobilisation. What would be the mechanism by which such crowding out occurred? One might argue that therapeutic, safe spaces encourage an “inward turn”, causing people to become solipsistic, solely focused on their emotional security or feeling good instead of being politically engaged. But that argument applies quite generally to a *lot* of human activities. One might avoid psychoanalysis, or therapy more generally, for the same reason.

On the contrary, far from disempowering people, safe spaces could encourage more political engagement by preventing “learned helplessness”. The concept of learned helplessness first originated in animal experiments in the late 1960s (see Overmier and Seligman 1967; Seligman and Maier 1967) and was later extended to humans in the early 1970s. The core idea is that an agent, having experienced a number of outcomes over which they have no control (typically with adverse effects), will, in the future, fail to act in instances when they do, in fact, have control. Early work on learned helplessness in humans found results analogous to those in the first animal experiments (Hiroto and Seligman 1975). Later research, though, found that people’s ability to theorise about our agency and efficacy required a more nuanced account in order to distinguish between transient forms of learned helplessness and more enduring forms. This led to the “attributional reformulation” of the theory (Abramson *et al.* 1978). According to this version, the type of learned helplessness

that humans exhibit depends on how the person affected sees it, depending on three attributes: (i) whether it derives from internal or external factors (e.g., personal traits or the environment); (ii) whether it derives from stable or unstable factors (e.g., things that are hard to change or not); and (iii) whether it derives from global or local factors (e.g., factors that are widespread or specific). When a person's helplessness is attributed to global and stable factors, the passivity acquired readily transfers to other areas. Safe spaces provide an environment where some of the factors underlying learned helplessness are absent, potentially helping to combat the phenomenon.¹¹

Given all these considerations, what are we to conclude about safe spaces? I suggest the following: many of the concerns raised were prompted by issues that are only indirectly related to the concept of safe spaces. In the Yale case, the concerns were about proper conduct and behaviour on campus when expressing disagreement. At the University of Missouri, the concerns were about the intimidation and bullying of a reporter and the apparent attempt to suppress the freedom of the press. At Brown, it concerned perceptions of what was an appropriate way to deal with psychological distress. The merit, function, and value of safe spaces were called into question simply as collateral damage. What I hope to have defended in this chapter is that safe spaces, far from being controversial, actually fulfil a number of important social needs, not only for the most vulnerable but for all of us.

Let us return to the key question about safe spaces: *where* should be safe, *for whom* and *from what*? Any group of freely associating individuals can collectively choose to adopt norms of conduct that require its members to refrain from behaviours or speech that are otherwise legal. This is an application of the right of self-determination and freedom of association, which form the minimal core, from Chapter 4. Any group of people can choose to self-regulate in ways to make the space they occupy "safe" as they see fit. (At this point, perhaps it would be best to drop the adjective "safe" altogether and reframe the issue as a debate over norms of appropriateness.) There are two problems that can arise. First, what happens when a group occupies a shared public space and they no longer have exclusive control over what happens in the area? Second, what happens when the group's membership is relatively fixed over time and there is internal disagreement over norms? Here, the fixed nature of the group means that structural reorganisation to neutralise the disagreement is not a feasible option. In both cases, conflict can arise between two sets of people over what is permissible to do or say. This, then, is one real underlying worry about "safe spaces": that one group's conception of permissibility or appropriateness collides with another, and there is no way to adjudicate the dispute without creating negative externalities. As it makes sense to situate this discussion within the context of polarised communities, we will revisit this topic in Chapter 28, "The collision of horizons".

19. No-platforming

When, if ever, should a person be stopped from giving a public lecture on a university campus? This practice, known as “no-platforming”, has been used to target a number of people, although not always successfully. A very brief list of some of those targeted include Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a member of the Dutch Parliament, screenwriter, and a feminist critic of Islamic law;¹ Julie Bindel, a feminist writer and activist;² Richard Dawkins, evolutionary biologist and author of *The Selfish Gene* and *The God Delusion*;³ Germaine Greer, author of *The Female Eunuch*;⁴ Boris Johnson, at the time, former Mayor of London, Member of Parliament and Brexit campaigner;⁵ Nick Lowles, director of Hope Not Hate; Peter Tatchell, an LGBT activist;⁶ Marine Le Pen, leader of the French far-right party Front National;⁷ Condoleezza Rice, former US Secretary of State;⁸ and Milo Yiannopoulos, former senior editor for *Brietbart News*.

In working through some of the concerns that no-platforming raises, I will argue that, despite there being some *prima facie* reasons supporting the practice, there are ultimately no defensible intellectual reasons for denying speakers a platform *provided that* they satisfy a certain standard of intellectual merit or public interest. The reasons for this are varied, but in brief: (1) any attempt to delineate sufficient criteria for no-platforming speakers will be self-undermining as there will be false positives that deny a platform to speakers who support causes advocated by those in favour of the no-platform policy; (2) that no-platforming also serves to alienate and antagonise those holding differing opinions in ways that are not conducive to changing beliefs, and thereby fuels polarisation in society; (3) that no-platforming misapplies Mill’s Harm Principle by assigning too much weight to immediate, local harms and assigning too little weight to long-term harms; and (4) that no-platforming, as a policy, is inconsistent with attempting to inculcate the necessary values for a civil, diverse, democratic society, namely, how do we live with those who have deeply divergent but sincerely held views about what constitutes a life worth living. (That is, we should tolerate everything except intolerance.)

Let’s begin by acknowledging some basic facts. Given the constraints on space, budgets, and time, it is not possible to accommodate all of the speakers a university would like to invite. Furthermore, not every speaker who would like to speak at a university should be given a platform because what they say might not meet the required standards. The relevant question then becomes, what are those standards? How do we navigate the space between speech permissible under law and speech granted a platform to address a wider university audience? For example, could one justify inviting Steve Bannon or Marine

Le Pen while excluding US white supremacist David Duke or UK far-right campaigner Tommy Robinson? And what about academics whose published work has strayed beyond the pale, like Charles Murray or Richard Herrnstein, whose controversial book, *The Bell Curve*, argued that IQ differences between certain racial and ethnic groups had (at least in part) a genetic basis?

As a rough first approximation, let's take the scope of universities to consist of some combination of educating students plus discovering or constructing new knowledge through research.⁹ One minimal requirement an invited speaker has to satisfy is that the talk can be reasonably expected to satisfy a certain threshold of intellectual merit in service of at least one of those two goals. Although that might sound like a trivial point, the fact that only *one* of those two goals needs to be satisfied has important implications. If it were only the creation of new knowledge that mattered, a number of topics could easily be excluded on the grounds that the *novelty* criterion isn't satisfied. For instance, one topic often appearing in public lectures concerns arguments for the existence (or nonexistence) of God and whether the findings of natural science are compatible (or incompatible) with certain conceptions of God. Were novelty the only criterion that mattered, one would be hard-pressed to say that those topics need to feature as often as they do. Given the amount of attention and debate these issues have received over hundreds of years, there is very little left to be said which properly counts as "new", unless one waters down the concept of novelty substantially.¹⁰ The reason these topics appear as frequently as they do is because they contribute to the *educative* mission of the university and reflect the interest of students or members of the public in the topic. A talk or debate can be worth having, even given scarce resources, if it brings something to the table outside of that found in the lecture, classroom, or seminar setting, even if it does not, in fact, create new knowledge.¹¹

How are we to understand the requirement that "a certain threshold of intellectual merit" is met? One way to operationalise this would be to say that the purpose of universities, in addition to the creation of new knowledge, is to teach students how to analyse and criticise ideas and theories, how to assess evidence, and how to argue in support of a position. Could a baseline threshold of merit be that the speaker attempts to argue for a particular view through providing reason and evidence? This view is consistent with the mindset advocated by George and West (2017), when they write: "All of us should be willing – even eager – to engage with anyone who is prepared to do business in the currency of truth-seeking discourse by offering reasons, marshaling evidence, and making arguments." That attitude nicely resonates with Popper's critical rationalism. In his book, *Conjectures and Refutations*, Popper asks the question, "How can we hope to detect and eliminate error?" His answer: "by *criticizing* the theories or guesses of others and – if we can train ourselves to do so – by *criticizing* our own theories or guesses" (Popper 1963, p. 53). One reason we should be eager to engage with others, trading arguments, and offering reasons as George and West describe, is that no view should be treated as sacrosanct, especially our own. In particular, "in searching for the truth, it

may be our best plan to start by criticizing our most cherished beliefs". (Popper 1963, p. 8)

That proposal is a good starting point, but reflection quickly reveals a number of inadequacies. First, it is at best a *necessary* rather than a sufficient condition. Not all views for which a person offers reasons, marshals evidence, and makes arguments merit a platform. Consider a member of the flat-Earth society who sincerely believes that the Earth is not roughly spherical, or someone who sincerely believes that the Earth is only 5,000 years old. Suppose that both individuals have arguments in support of their views. Both of these views are false. The reason these views do not merit a platform is not because they are false, nor because there are no good arguments to be made in support of them, but because these are no longer *significant* points of intellectual concern for most people. But even the claim that they are no longer significant points of intellectual concern needs to be qualified, because one can readily envision both the claims and the arguments appearing in a talk. For example, a sociologist discussing why people believe odd things would be a perfectly able to *mention* the claims and arguments, as illustrations of the phenomenon. The key distinction is that the claim and arguments are not being endorsed *in themselves*, but are being used to illustrate and investigate a wider sociological or psychological phenomenon.

Is it ever possible that a speaker intending to endorse a known false claim, having only bad arguments, might merit a platform to discuss the claim and the arguments *in themselves*, in the right circumstances? To provide a concrete example, consider someone who sincerely believes that Barack Obama was not born in the US. In this case, there is a very reasonable concern about why such a speaker might *not* merit a university platform – a concern that, again, has little to do with the fact that the claim is false and the arguments are bad. Here, the concern is that speaking at a university campus confers *legitimacy* to a topic, signalling it as one worth taking seriously. Since the “birther” movement was founded on the false belief that Barack Obama was not the legitimate president, this view, as the product of a conspiracy theory, does not deserve to be *endorsed* as a topic meriting discussion. However, even here there is an important qualification: when the issue of Obama’s birth and US citizenship *first* surfaced, there *may* have been sufficient interest in the topic as a matter of public concern for informed individuals to engage with the claim and set the record straight on what was known. (What I am suggesting is not having a “birther” being given a platform solely on his or her own, but rather facing a critical interlocutor prepared to interrogate the claim.) Yet I suggest we need to recognise there is a limited window of time when such a debunking service would merit regular discussion in a university setting. Why? Because frequent revisitation of matters debunked in the past serves only to *re-legitimize* the issue as one deserving attention.¹² The educational mission of the university is not well served when it misleads people by suggesting something deserves attention when it, in fact, does not.

In the “birther” example, despite the claim being false and the arguments being bad, the topic may have been seen as one of *significance* because it was a point of interest to the public. But this on its own is an insufficient reason – that the public is interested in something does not make it a matter of public interest. Responsible news organisations confront this dilemma all the time. Furthermore, if all that was needed to merit a platform was something in which the public was interested, that creates opportunities to skew the discourse of a university by gaming the media. The growth of “fake news” – stories that are little more than emotionally provocative clickbait – are an unfortunate side effect of the attention economy. Likewise, as we saw with the initial reporting on Watergate, the fact that most people *aren't* talking about something doesn't mean that it is worth ignoring. In short, popularity is no reliable guide to which topics merit a platform.

What about the idea that regardless of the veracity of the claim there is at least a claim being defended? Unfortunately, such a criterion would preclude extending a platform to people asked to speak about their experiences. One could easily envision former ambassadors, heads of state, CEOs, and social, ethnic, or religious leaders being invited to talk about their *experiences* in their particular role. Such talks would likely satisfy the requirement of intellectual merit, as they would provide interesting information about the challenges and demands faced by an individual in certain settings. It would be difficult to construe such a talk as defending a *claim*, in the sense normally meant, given the dependence upon subjective first-person experiences that cannot be independently assessed.

Finally, what about the idea that the person speaking must be an *expert*, even if just in terms of just reporting on their own subjective experiences? There can be experts on a variety of topics of dubious veracity (e.g., astrology) and people are generally taken to be experts about their own experiences. Yet, given what we know about how unreliable memory can be, this too is problematic. But even the requirement for expertise is too restrictive. Consider, for example, if President Trump had been invited to talk about climate change. Given his reaction to the Paris Agreement on climate change, Trump had strong opinions about the matter. However, it strains credulity to claim that he be counted as an *expert* on the topic. Yet the reason why Trump would have merited a platform had nothing to do with the intellectual virtues of anything he would say; it would derive entirely from his role as President of the United States. That alone would merit a platform for his views on climate change.

All these considerations suggest that the issue of “sufficient intellectual merit” does not admit a straightforward answer. We face an entanglement of concerns: engaging with pre-existing academic topics, the discussion or disclosure of new information or ideas, engaging with timely political and social issues, duties towards acting in the public interest, the pursuit of matters of intrinsic intellectual interest, and listening to individuals occupying certain roles and stations. This list is by no means exhaustive.

One helpful way to think about this entanglement of concerns is to consider the concept of *intellectual merit* as constituted by what Mackie (1980) called *INUS conditions*. In his wonderfully named book, *The Cement of the Universe*, Mackie was concerned with how we identify causes. Consider a very simple event – say, the lighting of a match – and ask yourself, what caused the match to light? Our first intuition would be to say that the match was lit because someone struck the match on the side of the box. But this ignores a host of other conditions that also need to be satisfied for the match to light, like the fact that matches burn only in the presence of oxygen. If the match had been struck in a room filled with pure nitrogen, the match would not have lit. Similarly, the lighting of the match required that the match was dry, not wet.

What Mackie proposed was that there is no single *thing* that caused the match to light. What needed to occur is a set of conditions $S = \{c_1, \dots, c_n\}$ where each c_i is *insufficient*, on its own, to bring about the lighting of the match, but each c_i is a *non-redundant* part of S . That is, if we consider the smaller set obtained by removing c_i from S , that smaller set of conditions would no longer result in the lighting of the match. Furthermore, even though S does bring about the lighting of the match, S is an *unnecessary* but *sufficient* set of conditions. S is unnecessary because there are many other ways to light the match. The person could have struck it on the side of a rock, for example, or used a blowtorch. A cause, then, is an Insufficient but Non-redundant part in an Unnecessary but Sufficient set of conditions (an INUS condition, for short).

The point Mackie wanted to make about causation was that singling out one *thing* as the cause of an event was really a statement about what we took to be important or unusual. The presence of oxygen in the air is just part of the normal background conditions, and so we don't identify the presence of oxygen as a cause of the match lighting, although we all know that matches don't burn in the absence of oxygen. What's unusual is that the match was struck and so we pick out that one item of the set S and label it the "cause" even though all of S is needed for the match to light.

I propose something similar holds for why certain individuals talking on certain subjects merit a university platform. Here, the set of INUS conditions involves *who* is speaking, about *what*, and *why*. Occasionally it matters *when* and *where* they are talking. Is the issue, like the "birther" example, particularly timely? Are they speaking to a small group of people or on the main stage of the university's largest lecture theatre? Sometimes we need to take into account *who* they are addressing (the audience¹³) and *how* the speaker intends to address them. And sometimes we need to consider what the expected *consequences* of the talk might be, given the audience. Most of the time, when we consider giving a person a platform, we concentrate on just one of these items because all the rest are uncontroversial and – like the presence of oxygen for the lighting of the match – simply folded into the background conditions.

What I have argued for in the preceding pages is that great flexibility exists in how the individual parts of the INUS condition can be satisfied when deciding who merits a platform. Disagreement over whether to grant a platform in controversial cases exists because no calculus exists for how to weigh these respective factors at any particular time, and disagreement may exist on the relative weights of each of them. Yet articulating this framework – as general as it is – and pointing out that intellectual merit is best understood in terms of INUS conditions does two things. First, it provides a framework for structuring an analysis of what makes a talk or debate worth having. Second, it helps us see one common source of controversy: fixing any *one* of those values, call it c_1 , almost surely allows c_2, \dots, c_n to be filled in, in some way, resulting in a decision of meriting a platform. But holding c_1 constant, there is often *another* way c'_2, \dots, c'_n of filling in the parameters that yields a verdict of not meriting a platform. This can generate controversy, especially with speakers or subjects at particularly inopportune places or times. What I want to suggest is that, provided people act in good faith, the balance should more likely tip in favour of platforming rather than no-platforming.

This “presumption to platform” can be seen as a consequence of Popper’s principle that the only thing we should not tolerate is intolerance. If a speaker is sincere, acting in good faith, not breaking the law, and an audience of people wish to hear what they say, it would be intolerant for one group to try to prevent the event from taking place. This also accords with the requirements of the minimal core underlying the cosmopolitan view developed in Chapter 4. It also connects with notions of epistemic humility that we will touch upon in Chapter 27. If we acknowledge there is some chance we might be wrong, we should be willing to have others subject our beliefs to critical scrutiny.¹⁴

Let us return to the original question: are there ever instances where no-platforming is appropriate? Of course. Hate speech that nevertheless falls within the boundaries of what is legal. Speech that makes no useful contribution to either the educative or research mission of the university. Some topics might prove so recherché as to never be of sufficient interest to enough people. But these statements, which I think are largely unproblematic, do not give much guidance on whether a particular instance of alleged “hate speech” really does count as such. Rarely do controversial cases fall neatly within these boundaries.

Reflecting on cases that have led to demands for no-platforming, it will prove helpful to consider three ideal types of speaker for whom concerns can be raised: the Provocateur, the Shill, and the Crank. Ben-Porath (2017, p. 39) provides a useful characterisation of the Provocateur: “speakers who intend merely to be provocative rather than to inform, challenge, or generate dialogue.” By this, I don’t mean an *agent provocateur*, someone who entices another individual to commit an illegal act. In my sense, the Provocateur aims to inflame the passions, to get people riled up, or to make people angry or exhilarated. The aim is not rational debate but incitement. Note that I don’t assume anything about whether the Provocateur sincerely believes in what is said.

The Shill is someone trying to make a buck, to become famous, or in pursuit of some other end. Whatever is said is of secondary importance, as the only point of the speech is to achieve that goal. The Shill is a snake-oil salesperson, only trading in repartee rather than remedy. Politicians often come across as Shills, with their flexible relationship with principles in pursuit of office. Perhaps the best encapsulation of the attitude of the Shill appears in the Groucho Marx quote: “Those are my principles and if you don’t like them, well, I have others.” This instrumentally rational approach means that the theoretical commitments of the Shill are suspect since the aim is not to reach the *truth* but for *you* to reach a certain mental state with respect to the end the Shill is trying to achieve. Oreskes and Conway (2011) provide examples of academic guns-for-hire employed by corporations to generate research supporting the company’s aims.

Our final ideal type is the Crank. Whereas our other two types may or may not believe what they say, it is the nature of the Crank to sincerely, often fiercely, believe what they say. The problem is that the Crank is committed to a view that is either false, extreme or so improbable that they exist beyond the pale in academic circles. Think of a Holocaust denier or someone who believes that the 9/11 attacks were an inside job coordinated by a US governmental cabal. The Crank has gone so far down the rabbit-hole that they have constructed an internally coherent account that resists evidence to the contrary.¹⁵ Yet in defending this view, the Crank insists that they alone are the person objectively pursuing the truth, the one person challenging orthodoxy.

Are there defensible reasons for no-platforming any of these types on the grounds of principle? Of the three, the most obvious candidate for exclusion is the Provocateur. Recall that, as Ben-Porath (2017) says, the Provocateur “[intends] merely to be provocative rather than to inform, challenge or generate dialogue.” Although it is unclear what good would come about from granting such a person a platform, we face two interrelated problems. The first difficulty is that Ben-Porath’s criterion involves attributing a mental state to a person. Can one really know if the individual merely intends to be provocative? Also, we might ask why it matters if someone intends merely to be provocative – shouldn’t the only criteria for judging whether someone merits a platform be what they *say*? (There are good and bad ways to be provocative.) The second difficulty is that good outcomes can result regardless of the speaker’s intent. What about the case where someone *really does* intend to be merely provocative yet is informative and generates discussion as an unintended consequence of their actions? A Provocateur can wind up making a contribution, even if accidentally. Benefits may also result when a Provocateur’s statements motivate *others* to do good intellectual work on either side of the divide. Those who agree could develop the theoretical foundations underlying the view, and those who disagree could develop arguments as to why the view is wrong, misguided, or dangerous. Lastly, regardless of whether one’s political aims are progressive or conservative, Provocateurs exist all along the political spectrum. We might wish to avoid Provocateurs whose views we disagree with, but banning all

Provocateurs means banning those on *our team* as well. As Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's much-quoted phrase says, "Well-behaved women seldom make history." Sometimes, it's the Provocateur who initiates the next revolution.

The defence provided for the Provocateur in the previous paragraph works best when the Provocateur speaks sincerely. A sincere Provocateur is, at least, addressing things they believe in, even if they might not behave in the most productive way for advancing understanding. The *disingenuous* Provocateur, though, seems like a sociopath. Why would someone want to rile people up to provoke a reaction about something they don't care about? One benefit of the framework suggested earlier is that, using the concept of INUS conditions, we can distinguish these two cases. As I said before, a university platform needs to be managed carefully as it signals that certain views are worth taking seriously. A controversial speaker, expressing views that provoke and may cause distress, might nevertheless merit a platform on the grounds that they speak sincerely about what they believe (presumably reflecting a view shared by other people as well), yet be denied a platform if they were speaking disingenuously (perhaps not representing views held by themselves nor other people). Flipping the value of that single parameter can, in some cases, be the deal-breaker.

The concern about disingenuous speech extends to the Shill, who by definition is less concerned about the content of what is said than the end it achieves. An important difference between the Shill and the Provocateur is that the Shill at least provides *arguments* whereas the Provocateur may not. Does that mitigate the concerns raised by disingenuous speech? In one sense, it seems to make matters worse. The Provocateur's speech, at least, has the virtue of lacking subtext – it is all about inflaming the passions. In the case of the Shill, there's an ulterior motive; the speech is a performance to bring about another, unstated end. But what end?

In a university context, we often assume, as Robert P. George and Cornel West wrote, that everyone values "the cultivation and practice of the virtues of intellectual humility, openness of mind, and, above all, love of truth." The love of truth is important because that has further implications regarding shared standards of how to assess evidence, how to reason, and so on. When the love of truth is subordinated to the advancement of social, political or personal ends, those implications don't necessarily follow. But even if this suggests that the starting presumption should be denying a platform to the Shill, other factors can still tip the balance in favour. When would we want climate change deniers and tobacco company apologists given a platform? We might want to give them a platform for the purpose of exposing and debunking their arguments. Ignoring bad science and disingenuous theories is dangerous because, when unchallenged, they can easily attract followers.¹⁶ Even if we know a Shill is acting in bad faith, it can be important to engage in defence of the public interest.

Lastly, what about the Crank? Conspiracy theorists rarely appear on university platforms because their views rarely meet the required standard of academic quality. Yet, as with the "birther" example, occasionally, there could be

a public interest argument to engage with them. Another reason to platform a Crank is that serious, accomplished scholars transform into Cranks from time to time. One example of this is the so-called “Nobel disease”, where winners of the Nobel prize occasionally go on to endorse bizarre ideas. In cases like that, it could be important to give the person a platform because, without subjecting the view to serious academic scrutiny, there’s a risk that the person’s prior justly-deserved reputation would lend credibility to their later bizarre view.

The upshot of these considerations is that there are few good general arguments for no-platforming speakers. We need to engage with controversial speakers, showing why their arguments are flawed or why their conclusions do not mean what they suggest. Attempting to shut down controversial speakers can actually do *more* harm than allowing them to speak because they not only benefit from the free media coverage generated by being denied a platform, but then their views are not subjected to scrutiny and not shown to be flawed. In the age of the internet, where anyone can publish material online and distribute it worldwide, denying a speaker a platform will not make a controversial view go away.

There is one other argument that we need to consider – the argument that some speakers should be denied a platform because their speech does harm to people in the audience. The particular example I would like to engage with concerns the feminist theorist Germaine Greer, who has attracted considerable criticism as a result of her views on transgender issues. Greer has argued that post-operative transgender men are not women. She has *not* argued that people should be denied the option of gender-reassignment surgery; she just thinks that surgery doesn’t transform a biological male into a woman. As a result of comments such as these, a number of activists have called for Greer to be denied a platform on the grounds that she is a “TERF” (trans-exclusionary radical feminist).

These no-platforming controversies are part of a much larger debate over how society should understand the terms “women” and “men”, the social practices associated with those terms (e.g., sporting competitions), and what kind of support, at what age, should be provided to people who identify as trans. These are complex topics intersecting with moral and political philosophy, developmental psychology, as well as biological and medical science. Let us briefly consider these points in order.

One helpful way of framing the debate, articulated by the transgender philosopher Sophie-Grace Chappell is as follows: trans-women are women in a way analogous to how adoptive parents are parents (Chappell 2018). The analogy is imperfect, like all analogies, but it reminds us how society has expanded its concept of *parent* to include those who did not initially satisfy its original, more narrow, biologically determined meaning. In most contexts, the fact that adoptive parents are not biological parents makes no difference whatsoever.¹⁷ But, in a few special circumstances, whether or not a parent is a biological or adoptive parent can matter. For example, a long-term medical study investigating the relationship between the health of parents and children,

looking to uncover how certain genetic predispositions are manifested, would rightfully exclude adoptive parents from participating in the study.

The way in which we understand the terms “man” or “woman”, with all of their social implications, requires thinking through the pragmatic consequences of adjustments in usage carefully. For example, what policies should be put in place for domestic violence shelters for vulnerable women, the vast majority of whom are cisgender?¹⁸ The concern here is not that some transgender women aren’t vulnerable and don’t deserve protection in domestic violence shelters, but rather that if *all* it takes to count as a transgender woman is an act of self-declaration, then this creates new avenues through which the safety of vulnerable persons can be threatened, as criminals are always looking for ways to exploit the system. Similarly, what policies should be put in place regarding transgender women and men competing in professional sports? The primary reason we split between women’s events and men’s events is not because of misogyny or transphobia but rather to ensure a level playing field; physiological and development differences (such as the presence of testosterone and its contribution to muscular development) between men and women are such that men, on average, tend to have different physical capabilities than women. The question of whether a transgender woman, who may have had a typical biologically male development, should compete in women’s sporting events is again not a question motivated by discrimination but pragmatics. It is, to invoke another analogy, similar to the concern about whether Oscar Pistorius, the infamous “blade runner”, should have been allowed to compete in the men’s 400-metre race using artificial legs since his legs were amputated below the knee when he was less than a year old. And, finally, another example concerns how we should form policies for medical treatment. Given that much medical care has been predicated on the assumption that there is a general alignment between a person’s gender and their sex, how do we accommodate transgender persons in overall medical policy? For example, transgender women don’t need to be tested for ovarian cancer, and transgender men don’t need to be tested for prostate cancer. But a policy that says that transgender women should be treated *exactly* identical to cisgender women in all respects overlooks these cases. Addressing these issues is not by any means insurmountable, but they require an open conversation so that all perspectives can be considered and a reasonable approach developed. Closing down a conversation by asserting a speaker to not be “on the right side of history” is counterproductive, and dangerous.¹⁹

This points to the underlying reason bans on speakers like Greer are problematic: underlying all of these issues about whether to platform or not is a complexity buried within Mill’s Harm principle, namely, how we adjudicate the balance between the reduction of short-term harms versus the reduction of long-term harms. Coupled with this is a further question of whether an attempt to reduce a *known* harm may itself generate *unknown* harms in the future. This is one of the reasons why people have urged caution with respect to medical treatment of young children who identify as transgender (Cass 2024).

Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that a talk by Greer will offend or cause harm to some persons, transgender or not, in the audience. Assuming that gender is a social construct, a claim about the conceptual relationship between being a transgender person and being a woman is a claim about how the boundaries of a socially constructed term are delineated. But when it comes to socially constructed terms, no single individual or group of individuals has *exclusive* ownership of the term, although some people are clearly more invested than others. I italicised the word “exclusive” for a simple reason: when you consider some social category *X*, the definition used to determine what counts as an *X* also determines what counts as a non-*X* as well. That doesn’t mean that the non-*X*’s necessarily get an equal say in how *X* is defined or understood, but it’s why exclusive ownership might be an issue, on occasion.

When it comes to how to understand the term “woman”, I make no substantial claim; men have been telling women how to understand themselves for far too long. My interest here only concerns procedure. The boundaries of gender categories, what they mean and who they apply to, are understood and negotiated, and constantly re-negotiated, by *society as a whole*, with bargaining power unequally distributed amongst the participants. Any change to the meaning and boundaries of gender categories – especially any *beneficial* change – in the long-run will require people working through various issues over time, in their own way. Reducing long-term harms by arriving at an enlightened understanding of gender categories requires having an open conversation about gender categories, allowing people to ask questions, explore ideas, and interrogate beliefs, all of which may cause short-term harm. The important point is that the short-term harm is not caused *for its own sake*, but that it occurs as an unavoidable by-product to bring about a greater good over the long run. This is the *doctrine of double effect* in action. Sometimes one may permissibly bring about a harm as an unintended but foreseeable side-effect of bringing about a good.

Drawing all of this together, I suggest the important lesson to take away about the debate over no-platforming is this: clearly, we don’t want to give a platform to hate speech or speech below a certain level of quality. Life is too short to listen to bad talks. But, otherwise, we should be tolerant and open to what we allow, especially with material we find challenging and difficult. When faced with views that are diametrically opposed to our own, views we fundamentally disagree with and think are utterly wrong, the thing to keep in mind is the same lesson eventually learned by the Inquisition – you can’t force someone to believe something. Preventing someone from talking about something they believe is probably the least effective way of persuading them otherwise. Getting people to change their beliefs is an exercise in winning both hearts and minds and requires sincere engagement and dialogue. That is why, as uncomfortable as it may be when we face challenging speech, the best response is more speech, better speech, that moves the conversation forward.

20. Concluding remarks

What, then, is the overall assessment of the Enlightenment conception of the Open Society? In this part we examined several alleged threats to it, as discussed by the media and by politicians from across the spectrum. Regarding the use of trigger warnings and safe spaces, I have argued that many of the concerns are much ado about nothing. The main concern about trigger warnings, the Bartleby objection, is overblown. The main concern about safe spaces, that they infantilise or disempower people, is paternalistic in that it assumes there is an all-things-considered right way to cope with psychological matters. Ultimately, though, this is an empirical question: are people more or less resilient than they were in the past? If people are less resilient, the question is *why*? I suspect that if people are less resilient, it isn't *because* of trigger warnings or safe spaces. Those are, at most, symptoms rather than causes.

One area where the Enlightenment conception of the Open Society was found to be threatened was the tendency by some, on both the right and the left, to deny a platform to speakers. I have argued that deciding who merits a platform when resources are scarce can be a surprisingly complicated question to answer, as there is no single principle that can be invoked to settle the matter. Instead, the matter is best analysed using the concept of INUS conditions which I have imported from the theory of causation. When scarcity of resources is not an issue, the basic principle is that, whenever possible, we should err on the side of granting a platform rather than denying it. We should be intolerant of intolerance but otherwise grant speakers a wide latitude to express their views.

When Popper wrote *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, he was rightly concerned with the *politicisation* of knowledge. In the years leading up to World War II, Popper had seen how knowledge and information were manipulated by political forces for purposes of propaganda and censorship, influencing education and research, and shaping how people understood the world. In both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, truth was often subordinated to political expediency or ideology.

We still need to be on guard against the politicisation of knowledge, but what our discussion about the Enlightenment conception of the Open Society reveals is another risk, which in our secular age we have perhaps neglected: the *moralisation* of knowledge. There is no precise demarcation between moralised knowledge and politicised knowledge because moral concerns frequently intersect with or become political concerns. But it is worth

making a distinction between the two, even if imperfect, because the processes that generate the two can diverge significantly. Politicised knowledge is often institutionalised, embedded within government bodies or other non-governmental organisations; it can be supported by hierarchical power structures and enforced from the top down through official sanctions. Moralised knowledge, on the other hand, can emerge organically from shifts in social values; it can be structured along any dimension of value, maintained and enforced through diffuse social norms with no clear structure. And perhaps most importantly, the enforcement of moralised knowledge can occur locally, from the bottom up via informal sanctions. As we saw in Part II, social media provides a powerful, immediate, decentralised mechanism for enforcing informal sanctions.

Knowledge can become moralised in a variety of ways, and it would take an entire book to explore the topic at length. I provide a short statement here as a framework for reflecting on topics already covered. The first way knowledge can become moralised is when certain questions or topics become taboo so that an interlocutor's attempt to raise them in good faith is viewed as a moral failing. Moralised knowledge, in this sense, is analogous to an article of faith in religious doctrine.¹ The second way is when certain questions or topics are not themselves taboo but when certain lines of enquiry are not permissible to discuss on the grounds that doing so causes, or potentially causes, harm. Moralised knowledge, in this sense, was behind the attempt to deny a platform to Germaine Greer. The third way knowledge can be moralised is when we treat people differently with respect to their ability to advance knowledge claims on certain subjects, either because of their own moral status or because of other properties they possess, such as their membership in certain social categories. We haven't encountered many examples of this third type of moralised knowledge in this part of the book, but this type frequently appears at the intersection of epistemology and identity politics.

The moralisation of knowledge presents a challenge for the Enlightenment conception of the Open Society because it interferes with the traditional ideal of the rational, free exchange of ideas among epistemic equals. The ideal is never realised in the world because differences in epistemic and expressive ability, along many dimensions, resulting from a combination of individual and social factors, always exist and prevent us from being epistemic equals. But it is worth thinking about how the moralisation of knowledge alters the process of enquiry, because sometimes we do actually want to alter the traditional ideal in that way.

The first type of moralised knowledge is not always bad because there is, even in secular societies, a category of *forbidden knowledge*. Not everything that *can* be known *ought* to be known. For example, there are a lot of facts regarding how much torture a person can endure before they die or are irreversibly harmed; that is one area of knowledge rightly excluded as a topic of enquiry, and so we know that there is a category of things one ought not enquire about. The second type of moralised knowledge is not always bad,

either, because as we have become more sophisticated knowledge producers, we realise that there are some lines of enquiry that are dangerous, harmful, or simply insufficiently fruitful to warrant the cost-benefit trade-off. For example, the gold standard of medical evidence is the randomised control trial (RCT), but not all medical interventions have been proven successful with an RCT. Appendectomies and setting broken bones in casts became established practices without ever having their effectiveness proved via an RCT. It would be madness to insist on such a study now, and so that line of enquiry is rightly excluded from investigation.

The third type of moralised knowledge is also sometimes justified because, when it comes to knowledge about persons or groups, there can be important power asymmetries at play. We are all familiar about how past “knowledge claims” about certain social categories, whether they are races, religions, or sexual orientations, have led to atrocities. In saying this, I am not arguing for an extreme view that says that *only* certain people are able to advance knowledge claims on certain subjects (although there are some who think that), but rather that because this is a sensitive area, we should proceed with caution.

The point is that there are reasonable cases where the production and dissemination of knowledge is rightly subject to moral considerations. Viewed from this perspective, questions about trigger warnings, safe spaces, and no-platforming are simply questions that naturally arise at the intersection of epistemology and morality. However, because the drivers of moral sentiment are not subject to the same kinds of evidential considerations as empirical knowledge, morality provides an orthogonal and independent perspective from which to critique knowledge production. In his writings, Foucault introduced the concept of *power-knowledge* to refer to the interaction between power and knowledge in society. Perhaps we should introduce the concept of *morality-knowledge* to refer to how the evolution and advancement of moral attitudes shapes the practice of knowledge production in society.

Knowledge production has always been subject to critique and regulation by the powerful; the persecution of Galileo by the Roman Catholic church for advocating the heliocentric model of the solar system is a classic example in the history of science. What we have explored in this Part is how knowledge production is also subject to critique and regulation from moral actors. Is this a threat to the Enlightenment conception of the Open Society? Not necessarily, but it is something of which we should remain aware and vigilant.

Notes to Part III: Safe spaces

16. Generation Wuss?

¹ That said, it's worth noting that older generations are also guilty of this kind of behaviour. After the UK's 2016 EU referendum, many conservative tabloids tried to stifle debate over whether the UK should stay in the single market or customs union, not by engaging with the *arguments* made, but rather by labelling those making the arguments as "Remoaners" or "Saboteurs". Conservative MP Chris Heaton-Harris requested all universities to make available their syllabi and teaching about Brexit, presumably to ensure that left-leaning lecturers were not corrupting the youth by indoctrinating them against Brexit. (This request, widely condemned as McCarthyist, was largely ignored by universities.)

² This last sentiment is often expressed with a quote misattributed to Voltaire: "I wholly disapprove of what you say and will defend to the death your right to say it." The actual source of the quote is Evelyn Beatrice Hall, who used it to describe Voltaire's *attitude* when he was defending the philosopher Claude-Adrien Helvétius, whose work "De l'esprit" had been burnt in protest over its content.

17. Trigger warnings

¹ Sometimes the warning was just about the *title*. Frank Zappa's album *Jazz from Hell* received a warning label from the Parents Music Resource Center even though it solely consisted of instrumental tracks because of the inclusion of the word "Hell" in the title and a song entitled "G-Spot Tornado".

² This is essentially the same debate that has been going on ever since John Stuart Mill first introduced the Harm Principle in *On Liberty*: "The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others."

³ I label post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) a "generally recognised harm" rather than a universally recognised harm for two reasons. First, although features of PTSD have been recognised for hundreds of years (some have noted that Henry VI in Shakespeare's play demonstrates many features of PTSD), it first appeared in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in 1980. Second, the entry for PTSD has undergone revision since its introduction, as people argue over its specific nature. Mental disorders, unlike broken bones and cancer, have aspects that are socially constructed and hence subject to disagreement (see Hacking 1995, 1998).

⁴ The concept of a microaggression was introduced by Chester Pierce in 1970 as follows: "Most offensive actions are not gross and crippling. They are subtle

and stunning. The enormity of the complications they cause can be appreciated only when one considers that these subtle blows are delivered incessantly. Even though any single negotiation of offense can in justice be considered of itself to be relatively innocuous, the cumulative effect to the victim and to the victimizer is of an unimaginable magnitude. Hence, the therapist is obliged to pose the idea that offensive mechanisms are usually a *micro-aggression* as opposed to a gross, dramatic, obvious *macro-aggression* such as lynching.”

⁵ The warnings for *The Great Gatsby* were suggested by a student at Rutgers in a letter to the administration arguing in support of trigger warnings. The comment regarding Achebe’s novel is an example from a draft policy by Oberlin College, which later withdrew the policy requiring such warnings (Flood 2014).

⁶ In saying this, I don’t mean to single out religious belief. Something similar could be said for an atheist asked to study arguments for the existence of God, or about people who don’t believe climate change.

⁷ If you are teaching a class on the history of slavery, or the civil rights movement, and you are going to show a photograph of a lynching, you *should* be able to justify it on pedagogical grounds. If you can’t, there is an important question about the value it has in the classroom. There is no point in showing shocking and upsetting materials *just* to be shocking and upsetting. Trainee doctors encounter dead bodies and photographs of horrific injuries and conditions all the time because those are *necessary* for learning; they aren’t shown violent pornography or dark web torture videos.

⁸ To the extent universities are self-governing bodies, the rules are always in-principle open to revision by its members. That means that a student progressing through the ranks and eventually joining the community of scholars will be able to argue for revisions to its social practices.

18. Safe spaces

¹ Let’s also not forget that *words* are powerful and can inflict great harm. Emotional abuse is a form of domestic violence whose psychological effects can last longer than the damage caused by physical abuse and can result from words alone.

² On this point, see also the discussion in Chapter 28.

³ At least not under threat in a way that *literally* concerns the safety and well-being of the individual members. Political parties often describe themselves as “endangered” or facing an “existential threat” when their base declines rapidly or shifts to support another party. Yet such language, although evocative, does not correspond to the same kind of very real threat faced by people living in racist, sexist, homophobic, or transphobic societies.

⁴ By “recognised”, I do not mean that the group necessarily has any official protected status by the government, or that the characteristics determining group

membership are well-defined, but that the group's existence is more-or-less understood or understandable by a typical member of the society. Examples of this include ethnic groups, alumni organisations, employment-based groups, societies defined around mutual interests, athletic collectives, and so on.

⁵ Depending on the nature of the group, this imbalance of power can arise from a variety of causes, with some imbalances of power not being morally insignificant. A Latvian-American society would lack power, in some respects, since its membership base would be extremely small compared to that of the overall society. (According to the 2000 US Census, there were around 87,000 people in the States claiming Latvian heritage.) Yet that group would, at the same time, largely inherit all of the advantages of being white in America. Now contrast that group with a political organisation of Black women teachers in the US. (Black women constituted 5.3% of the US teacher population in 2013, or approximately 180,000 people, according to Thomas-Carver and Darling-Hammond 2017.) Even if both groups had roughly equal amounts of power, and hence faced the same *relative* power asymmetry compared with other social groups, we would probably not view the first group's lack of power as morally significant, whereas we would more likely view the second group's lack of power to be so, due to its intersection with racial and gender considerations and the fact it represents a larger constituency.

That said, thinking of "power" as if it were an absolute attribute attached to a group (or a person) is misleading. Power, understood as the ability to see desired outcomes realised, is particular to each individual outcome. A group or person may be particularly powerful with respect to a single outcome while, at the same time, utterly lacking in power with respect to other desired outcomes. Referring, in general terms, to the power of a group or an individual is to refer to their expected ability to realise any outcome falling within their set of desired outcomes.

⁶ Describing an entity as "liminal" means that it straddles a boundary or threshold; here, I think of the liminality of the group as referring to its perceived social legitimacy. Examples of such groups would be gays and lesbians after the decriminalisation of homosexual behaviour (but before social attitudes shifted to conceive of sexual orientation as just one aspect of ordinary variability among human traits), the civil rights movement in 1960s America, the various waves of feminism, and perhaps socialist or communist parties in the US. The important point is that the group is undoubtedly recognised by the wider society, but attitudes vary considerably regarding its social status. This does not necessarily correspond to a lack of power, although it may be correlated with it. After the financial crisis, investment bankers (or financiers, more generally) took on a liminal status as many viewed them disfavouredly and at best a necessary evil, yet they still held enormous power.

⁷ In this case, the criteria for group membership is still being negotiated, both at the group and the individual level. Here I have in mind the socially constructed nature of the kind terms lying behind group labels (see Hacking 1996, 1999, 2007)

⁸ In 1837, Calhoun said: “I hold that the present state of civilization, where two races of different origin, and distinguished by color, and other physical differences, as well as intellectual, are brought together, the relation now existing in the slaveholding states between the two, is, instead of an evil, a good. A positive good.” The following year, he stated: “Many in the South once believed that slavery was a moral and political evil. That folly and delusion are gone. We see it now in its true light, and regard it as the most safe and stable basis for free institutions in the world.” (See Wikiquote 2024, for these quotes, and others.)

⁹ In the US, although a number of restrictions can be placed on speech with regard to the time, place, and manner of the speech (e.g., protesting loudly outside someone’s window at midnight), those restrictions need to be content-neutral. Content-based restrictions need to meet far stricter criteria, such as advocating “imminent lawless action” or obscenity or making a “true threat”. Hate speech, insofar as it does not violate these criteria, is protected under the First Amendment. This was affirmed by the Supreme Court in their 2011 decision on *Snyder v. Phelps*, when they ruled that the picketing of a military funeral by the Westboro Baptist Church was protected speech, even though the placards saying “God hates you”, “Fag troops”, and “Thank God for dead soldiers” intentionally caused emotional distress in the gay father of one of the dead soldiers.

¹⁰ According to *The Maneater*, the University of Missouri student newspaper, the protests were originally about changes made to graduate student healthcare and the threat to remove the provision of abortion services. The discussion in the text was drawn from a timeline originally published at <http://www.themaneater.com/special-sections/mu-fall-2015>, but which appears to be no longer available. (The discussion here is not intended to be complete, and some events have been omitted for the sake of brevity.) Another history is available at the Wikipedia page discussing the 2015–16 protests: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2015-2016_University_of_Missouri_protests.

¹¹ In a way, safe spaces can be seen as helping to mitigate the loss of control under aggregation, as discussed in Chapter 10.

19. No-platforming

¹ Ali was invited by Brandeis University in 2014 to receive an honorary degree and speak at the commencement. After an online petition collected more than 6,000 signatures, Brandeis withdrew the offer of an honorary degree and dis-invited Ali on the grounds that some of what she had said was, “inconsistent with Brandeis University’s core values” (Leef 2014).

² Invited to speak at the University of Manchester in October 2015, Bindel was later disinvited on the grounds that her views could “incite hatred towards and exclusion of our trans students” (Bell 2016).

³ Dawkins was scheduled for a live interview on the Berkeley radio station KPFA, followed by a book signing in support of his book, *Science in the Soul: Selected Writings of a Passionate Rationalist*. The radio station cancelled the event after discovering some of Dawkins’ more controversial public statements, stating that he had hurt people with “his tweets and other comments on Islam” (Fortin 2017).

⁴ Greer was invited to give a talk at Cardiff University in October 2015. A petition gathering over 3,000 signatures was circulated in attempts to bar her from speaking due to her views about transgender women. During an interview with BBC *Newsnight*, Greer stated that she would not be going to Cardiff, regardless of whether the petition was successful, as she was “getting a bit old for all this” (Dearden 2015). Despite the protest and her earlier statement that she would not speak she wound up giving the lecture. She later characterised the university’s public statement defending her invitation, “We in no way condone discriminatory comments of any kind,” as “weak as piss” (Packham 2016).

⁵ Although he was reported in several papers as having been “no platformed,” this was in error for two reasons. First, Johnson *was* invited to speak at a debate over the EU Referendum at King’s College, London, but he never accepted the invitation. Second, the reported email disinviting Johnson was unofficial, written by a volunteer at the King’s Think Tank who included a fake title in his signature. The email was not actually approved by the President, Vice-President, or Student Committee of the think tank (Packham 2016).

⁶ Tatchell was invited to give a talk at a public event titled “Re-Radicalizing Queers? Should we toe the line or cause a stir?” at Canterbury Christ Church University on 15 February 2016. Fran Cowling, the LGBT Officer of the National Union of Students, refused to speak at the same event unless Tatchell was dropped from the bill, alleging he was both transphobic and racist (Johnston 2016). However, Tatchell appeared in the event, with Cowling choosing not to participate.

⁷ Le Pen was invited to address the Oxford Union on 5 February 2015. The speech went ahead, but was delayed by over an hour by approximately 300 protesters outside the event (Henley and Ullah 2015).

⁸ Invited to give the commencement address at Rutgers University in May 2014, but declined after student protests (Fitzsimmons 2014).

⁹ Many universities now have subsidiary entities with connections to the business world, charged with the task of transforming the outcomes of pure research into commercial applications. Some have entities that facilitate academics engaging in consultancy work for governments or other organisations. Some have faculty wholly or partially dependent on “soft money” research

grants. The purpose of the modern university is thus only imperfectly described as “teaching and research”. In the UK, the recent push to including “impact” in the assessment of research quality forces academics to also think about the short-term social or policy implications of their research. Although these considerations introduce a number of complexities that matter – such as the possible political consequences of academic research – I assume that unlike in other parts of the world (viz., Turkey under the Erdoğan regime), a general commitment to the principle of academic freedom means that we can, for the present purposes, ignore these complexities and speak abstractly just about the pursuit of research.

¹⁰ Those interested in seeing a masterful summary of classical arguments for and against the existence of God should read the appendix to Rebecca Goldstein’s novel, *36 Arguments for the Existence of God*.

¹¹ If one interprets the mission of “creating new knowledge” to refer to creating knowledge in *other people* – i.e., causing someone to know something that they did not know before – then the novelty criterion would be satisfied in this case as well. But then the problem becomes that the novelty criterion is all-too-easily satisfied. There are infinitely many truths, most of which are fundamentally boring but which would satisfy the novelty criterion. When we talk about the creation of new knowledge, what we want is the creation of new *significant* knowledge. Good luck trying to give an analysis of what that means, though.

¹² Debates on the reality of climate change provide another illustration of this phenomenon. Climate change deniers try to create a false sense of debate over issues generally settled by scientists in order to maintain, in the eye of the public, a sense that their concerns are real and legitimate. This technique, previously used by tobacco companies in their efforts to resist the link between smoking and cancer is well-documented in the book, *Merchants of Doubt* (Oreskes and Conway 2011).

¹³ Recall our discussion of Grice’s theory of speaker meaning and the role played by the audience from Chapter 11.

¹⁴ Popper (1963) puts this point nicely as follows: “in searching for the truth, it may be our best plan to start by criticizing our most cherished beliefs”. Notice that this holds even when we talk about socially constructed practices for which the notion of objective, all-things-considered truth doesn’t apply. Even in that case, a group that is searching for *its truth* may still benefit from critically scrutinising its cherished beliefs.

¹⁵ On this point, see the discussion of epistemic closure in Chapter 27.

¹⁶ On this point, see the discussion of epistemic deference in Chapter 25 and how beliefs can serve as signifiers of group identity in Chapter 27.

¹⁷ In general, use of the word “real” should be avoided when discussing adoptive parents, transgender individuals, and a great many other topics. Talk

about “real parents” or “real men” or “real women” is an imprecise, lazy construction that explicitly suggests that one interpretation of the term (e.g., “parent” or “men” or “women”) should be favoured over all others. But there is no such all-things-considered favoured interpretation. There is a factual, historical question of how the term was generally understood in the past (but this, too, may not have a single, unique answer). There is also the question of what the salient property is for the discussion at hand, which may not overlap with the historical usage of the term. (For example, one could ask whether someone found guilty of felony murder is a “real murderer”.) And then there is a purely stipulative sense of the term “real” as in the title of the 1980s book *Real Men Don't Eat Quiche*. Understanding any particular use of the word “real” will depend on the conversational context. In any event, greater precision would be obtained by avoiding the word altogether.

To see this, think about the question of whether a biological parent is a “real parent”. Historically, being a biological parent involved participating in the act of fertilisation, carrying the fetus to term, and giving birth. But most steps of this process can be carried out differently, given modern technology. What about parents who could not conceive naturally but were able to through IVF treatment? What about a woman who was unable to carry a foetus to term and so relied on a surrogate mother? What about a woman who was able to carry a foetus to term but relied on an egg from a donor? What about the child who was born with DNA from three different people: the mother’s nuclear DNA, a donor’s mitochondrial DNA, and the father’s DNA? (For a discussion of this fascinating case, see Hamzelou 2016.) Is there a difference between natural childbirth and Caesarean section, as to whether someone counts as a “real parent”? What about a sperm donor who isn’t involved in raising the child? Or is being a biological parent only relevant for being considered a “real parent” if they are involved in raising the child as well? If you think that, what if one does the best job they can but nevertheless does such a bad job that the child has to be put into foster care? In none of these cases does invoking the word “real” add anything illuminating to the discussion.

Saying that some person P isn’t a *real X*, for some X , is nothing more than a rhetorical strategy for denying the application of the term X to P – raising P ’s defensive hackles and putting them on the back foot – on the grounds that they lack some property, or set of properties, deemed essential for being an X . But, whereas it might make sense to speak of metaphysically essential properties for something like *being an electron*, it strains credulity to think that there can be anything metaphysically essential to a social property like *being a parent*. For more on this topic, see the discussion of *authenticity* in Part IV, Chapter 25.

¹⁸ “Cisgender” refers to those individuals whose gender identity aligns with their birth-assigned sex. Some find the term “cisgender” objectionable (“political correctness gone mad!”) but there is good sense behind it. The prefix “cis” in Latin means “on this side of”. So, the natural contrast to “transgender”, where the prefix “trans” (also Latin) means “across from” is thus “cisgender”.

¹⁹ How many tens of millions of people were killed as a result of actions taken by Lenin, Stalin, and Mao to be on the “right side of history”?

20. Concluding remarks

¹ One possible example of this type of knowledge might be the existence of anthropogenic climate change. It is increasingly the case that people who express a sceptical attitude to this claim receive a reaction highly charged with moral valence. (And I make this observation as someone who is a firm believer in anthropogenic climate change.) I suspect that this is because the evidential support behind anthropogenic climate change is so great that, when someone expresses scepticism, the most natural explanation is not that the person is, in fact, a sceptic, but rather than that they are adopting the *persona* of a sceptic in order to advance other morally objectionable interests. However, even if this explanation is correct, it does have the side effect of repressing any good faith challenge to received wisdom.

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