TSHD Research Traineeship Application

1. **Project Title:**

   You had to be there: Virtual experience and moral knowledge

2. **Coordinators**

   Applicant 1: Dr Michal Klincewicz,
   Tilburg University, Department of Cognitive Science and Artificial Intelligence (CSAI)

   Applicant 2: Dr Amanda Cawston,
   Tilburg University, Department of Philosophy

   Applicant 3: Dr Nathan Wildman,
   Tilburg University, Department of Philosophy

3. **Project Summary**

   Contemporary ethics of war is often accused of being disconnected from the realities of combat. For instance, Fussell (a veteran) admonishes influential Just War theorist Michael Walzer for neglecting the complex moral situation tied to a soldier's view (Walzer and Fussell 1981). This perspective can lend a different weighting to the choices faced in war and 'mess up' the tidy moral landscape mapped out by ethicists far removed from conflict. Thus, Fussell, like many others, argues that combat experience is essential for recognizing the moral realities of war. This leaves us with the question: Are Fussell et al right?

   One reason to believe that they are comes from insights in standpoint epistemology. Generally speaking, **standpoint epistemology** claims that having a particular, socially situated perspective provides an epistemic privilege within a relevant realm, extending beyond the merely pragmatic know-how to a deep and fundamental know-that. In its strongest form, this epistemic privilege translates into a necessary condition; that is, a requisite for grasping some knowledge is being suitably experienced.
   　　Extending this idea, a plausible way of interpreting Fussell's claim is that undergoing war-experiences is a necessary condition for properly understanding the ethics of war. However, connecting standpoint epistemology and the ethics of war in this manner leads to a number of further questions. Specifically, are experiences in war of the right sort to support privileged knowledge claims? Moreover, are there alternative means of acquiring the relevant knowledge that do not involve the risks/harms of going to war?

The key **hypothesis** underlying this project is that the associated experiences are broadly **agential** in character. That is, it is the experience of acting as a moral agent in the context of war that supports moral knowledge claims.

Assessing this hypothesis is a multi-step project; within the context of the research traineeship, we will focus on two initial research questions.

1) Can standpoint epistemology support privileged moral knowledge claims stemming from experience in war? What is the role of agency in grounding privileged knowledge claims?

2) Can study of engagement with interactive technologies provide evidential support for the above connection between agency and moral knowledge?

We aim to shorten the moral knowledge gap between combat veterans and average civilians regarding the ethics of war. We will do this by leveraging immersion created by **interactive fictions** (e.g. serious games, virtual reality) that involve the user in **agential** experience and which may provide the basis for the sort of knowledge essential for recognizing the moral realities of war.

The trainees will work on two core packages to help achieve this aim. These packages are closely related, in that *Package 1* will form the basis for the hypotheses tested in *Package 2*. To measure the gap between the understanding of the moral realities of war of a civilian and a veteran we will need well-motivated operationalizations of moral knowledge that only rigorous philosophical work can deliver. This **interdisciplinary** synergy will be crucial to success and will also have the added benefit of fostering open-minded research practices in the trainees.

Package 1: Agency and Standpoint Epistemology

Package 1 will begin with a review of existing literature in standpoint epistemology with the aim of identifying the kinds of experiences (and contexts) that are thought to support privileged knowledge claims. This review will result in a typology of standpoint experiences that will aid analysis of experience types and contexts that have not yet been discussed in standpoint epistemology terms. This includes veterans' accounts of acting as a moral agent in the context of war. The study will examine the extent to which experience of **acting** in morally charged contexts aligns with epistemically privileged experience, and in so doing, attempts to identify the conditions and relevant features of such experience that enable a distinct moral standpoint. Identifying these conditions will aid the design of the empirical study in *Package 2*, as well as lay conceptual groundwork for the possibility of coming to understand the moral realities of war via other means (Wildman and Woodward

2018). With these conditions identified, further studies into the possibility of simulating experience through interactive media or virtual reality become possible.

Trainee 1 will participate in this theoretical study including in the literature review and in co-authorship on a philosophical paper detailing the results.

Deliverables: 1 paper to be published in a philosophical journal + 1 conference presentation

Package 2: Intervention Increasing Moral Knowledge.

Package 2 will consist of the design, implementation, carrying-out, and analysis of data from one or more experiments with a video game in or out of virtual reality.

At the first stage of the project, we will select an appropriate video game, which may include video games already in existence, such as *This War of Mine* or *Spec-Ops: the Line*. We will then select appropriate measures of values, such as the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (Graham et al 2015) or custom-made vignettes that test for knowledge of moral realities of war. We will also collect physiological data, including galvanic skin response, heart-rate, and record facial expressions. We will then use between-subject and in-subject analysis to uncover the effect of an immersive agentive experience of a morally charged situation in context of a military conflict, if it exists. The resulting data will bear directly on the two *Research Questions* giving us insight on whether appropriate agentive experience in video games can help close the gap between the moral knowledge of a civilian and a veteran.

Methods: Experimental design will be based on a recent framework proposed by *Applicant 1*, which targets mechanisms and capacities that are constituent parts of moral decision making (Klincewicz, Frank, and Sokólska 2018). Most recently *Applicant 1* supervised two Masters-level theses that involved experiments based on that framework and which deal directly with moral decision making in video games. *Trainee 2* will join other students in carrying on this work. All experimental work will be carried out in *MindLabs* affiliated with CSAI, which has high-end gaming computers, sensors, and cameras.

Trainee 2 will be involved in all stages of *Package 2*, where *Applicant 1* will also integrate the trainee with a larger team of faculty and Masters students from CSAI that work on similar projects.

Deliverables: dataset from 1+ experiment, 1+ paper reporting on results, 1+ conference presentation.

4. Project timeline

09 / 19
- Package 1: Literature Review
- Package 2: Literature Review

10 / 19
- Package 1: Create Experience Typology
- Package 2: Selection of stimuli and hypotheses

11 / 19
- Package 1: Comparison and identification of conditions
- Package 2: Experiment piloting in MindLabs

01 / 20
- Package 1: Paper writing and review
- Package 2: Finalizing experiment

02 / 20
- Package 1: Paper writing
- Package 2: Data collection

03 / 20
- Package 1: Compare Moral Agency with identified conditions
- Package 2: Data preparation

04 / 20
- Package 1: Conference presentation
- Package 2: Analysis

05 / 20
- Package 1: Submit for publication
- Package 2: In-house evaluation

06 / 20 - onward
- Package 1: Review and develop proposal for future research
- Package 2: Presentations and publication

5.   Research Trainee Profile

Students from both the Bachelor (2nd or 3rd year) and Masters programs are eligible to apply. We are looking for two trainees:

Trainee 1: A successful candidate will have good knowledge of philosophical research methods and be familiar with foundational topics (including in political philosophy, moral and standpoint epistemology). Knowledge of debates in the ethics of war are an asset, though not required. The trainee will engage primarily in reading and reporting on existing literature in standpoint epistemology and the ethics of war. They will also participate in co-authoring a research paper, primarily under the supervision of *Applicants 2* and *3*. *Trainee 1* will also participate in project meetings and discuss how the findings in *Package 1* can inform the design and discussion of research in *Package 2*.

Trainee 2: A successful candidate will have basic knowledge of statistics and some experience programming, but also at least an appreciation of philosophical work in epistemology, philosophy of cognitive science, or ethics. Some experience with data analysis or behavioral experiments will be looked on very favorably. The trainee will engage in the design, implementation, and carrying-out of experiments under close supervision from *Applicant 1*, but also in group consultations with *Applicant 2*, *Applicant 3* and *Trainee 1* on topics relevant to both packages. We will specifically target CSAI students for this position, but it will be open to anyone that is highly motivated and positioned to engage in *Package 1* or *Package 2.* Students in STEM, behavioral sciences, social sciences, or philosophy are all welcome. Experience with video games and/or virtual reality technologies is a plus.

How to apply:

Send CV, availability during the project timeline, motivation letter, and other things you think are relevant to: m.w.klincewicz@uvt.nl.

References

Graham, Jesse, et al. "Mapping the Moral Domain." *J Pers Soc Psychol* 101.2 (2011): 366-385.

Klincewicz, Michał, Lily Eva Frank, and Marta Sokólska. "Drugs and hugs: stimulating moral dispositions as a method of moral enhancement." *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements* 83 (2018): 329-350.

Wildman, Nathan and Richard Woodward. "Interactivity, Fictionality, and Incompleteness" in *The Aesthetics of Video Games*, eds. G. Tavinor & J. Robson (London: Routledge) 2018: 112-127.

Walzer, Michael, and Paul Fussell. "An Exchange on Hiroshima." *The New Republic*, September (1981).