KNOWLEDGE AND INQUIRY
HIGHER 2

(Syllabus 9759)

INDEPENDENT STUDY
PROPOSAL FORM

Candidate’s Name: Ee Ying Hui Dina

Index Number:

Centre Name: Hwa Chong Institution (College)

Centre Number: 3036

Year of Examination: 2009

NRIC / FIN:

If this is the 2nd submission, please tick here

Research Topic:

Applying virtue in epistemic justification

Rationale for Choice of Research Topic (e.g. potential contribution of study to existing knowledge / research):

There is a distinction between knowledge and belief. Knowing something means we are justified in believing something to be true. If one is justified in his belief, it means that he has grounds for his belief. There are various theories that explain what justifies us in believing the things we do. The mainstream theories include foundationalism, coherentism and reliabilism.

For moral beliefs, some philosophers argue that there is another approach to explain justification. In this approach, to determine whether one is justified in his moral belief, we do not look at whether he has foundational beliefs, whether his beliefs cohere or whether he arrives at his belief through a reliable method. Instead, he is justified in his beliefs if he arrives at them through the exercise of certain virtues. The aim of these virtues is to arrive at knowledge. These virtues are termed “epistemic virtues” or “intellectual virtues”. Examples include intellectual thoroughness, intellectual courage, openness. This approach is part of virtue epistemology. Virtue epistemology is modeled on Aristotle’s virtue theory in ethics. Virtue theory focuses on the exercise of virtue in moral acts while virtue epistemology focuses on the exercise of virtue in moral beliefs. For Aristotle, being moral is about being virtuous. For virtue epistemologists, knowing something is about being virtuous.

In this study, I seek to evaluate if applying virtues to arrive at our moral beliefs is an adequate justification for these beliefs.

Theories of justification attempt to explain how we justify beliefs, including our moral beliefs. However, there seems to be no universal agreement on what adequately justifies our moral beliefs. This may be one of the reasons why there is no universal knowledge of what is right and wrong, how one should act and so on. Virtue epistemology attempts to shift the focus in our understanding of how moral beliefs are justified. Moral beliefs are no longer justified in terms of simple, deductive arguments or general principles. Instead, we take into account the more intuitive, more human side of how one comes to know things. One knows by applying certain virtues to arrive at a justified true moral belief. Thus, the emphasis is on the nature of the knower, rather than the nature of the beliefs. An evaluation of virtue epistemology will enable us to determine if it is indeed possible to explain how we justify our moral beliefs. More generally, the evaluation will also broaden our understanding of what constitutes adequate justification for our beliefs.
Proposed Title of Research Essay:

Evaluating virtue epistemology as a means of justifying our moral beliefs

Synopsis of Research Essay:

In this paper, I aim to:
1. Find out how justification is analysed according to virtue epistemology
2. Evaluate whether virtue epistemology provides a tenable alternative to foundationalism, coherentism and reliabilism as a theory to justify our moral beliefs
3. Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of virtue epistemology in justifying our moral beliefs

Virtue epistemologists seek to explain knowledge in terms of epistemic virtues. However, this paper is limited to evaluating their account of epistemic justification. Virtue epistemologists attempt to provide an account of knowledge in general but this paper limits its evaluation to the domain of moral knowledge. This paper also does not seek to define what specific epistemic virtues are. A potential problem is the lack of sources in virtue epistemology, which is a relatively new branch of study.

Literature Review (i.e. an overview of the current state of research and knowledge in this topic):

The concept of virtue has been important to ethics since its beginning, but has only recently been adopted by epistemologists. Different philosophers have different views of what virtue epistemology is. Hence there exist different views on how virtues can be used to justify beliefs. Linda Zagzebski (1995) models Aristotle’s virtue theory in ethics to epistemology. In her case, one is justified in his belief if the belief is arrived at in a virtuous way, the same way one is moral if one exhibits virtues. Other philosophers like Ernest Sosa (1980) and Jonathan Greco (1992, 1993) have a different view of what these virtues are. Their examples of virtues are faculties like eyesight and memory, which are not virtues at all in Aristotle’s virtue theory. They have a broader sense of “virtue” in which anything with a function has virtues. Other philosophers like Kvanvig (1992) treat reliabilism as a subset of virtue epistemology. Although there are different views on what justification is based on virtue epistemology, there has been a lack of critical evaluation on whether their definitions are adequate in justifying our beliefs. In my study, I hope to fill in this gap.

There are philosophers who argue that there is value in defining knowledge and justification in terms of virtues. Linda Zagzebski puts forth various reasons to show that in ethics, virtue theory can better explain moral actions than act-based theories. Similarly, she argues that, in epistemology, applying virtue can better explain concepts of knowledge than belief-based theories. Lorraine Code (1987) stresses that it is important to adopt a “socialized” approach to epistemology, one that takes into account the knower, rather than the beliefs only. In understanding those philosophers’ reasons for supporting virtue epistemology, I hope to evaluate if these merits are significant. I also hope to evaluate if virtue epistemology does provide a tenable alternative to foundationalism, coherentism and reliabilism in justifying our moral beliefs.

Methodology (if applicable):

[State clearly which, if any, qualitative and/or quantitative methods will be used]

The methodology of this study will be qualitative, consisting of a comprehensive library research. I will make reference to and analyse existing literature concerning virtue epistemology and virtue theory.

Candidate’s Signature: ____________________________ Date: __________

Teacher’s Name: ____________________________ Signature: ____________________________ Date: __________