My research lies mainly at the intersection of psychology and economics. I conduct laboratory experiments in which people make choices about how to divide real money between themselves and others. The decisions and payoffs are meant to capture important aspects about the ethical decisions we face in everyday life. As an example, participants in one experiment had the power to allocate money between themselves and an anonymous other participant. They could choose to give (A) $6 to themselves and $1 to the other person, or (B) both people $5. Perhaps not surprisingly, many participants chose $5 each, which entails giving up only $1 to benefit someone else $4. Such behavior seems to show that people care about fairness and equity. However, a second condition of the experiment shows that the factors underlying fair choice are not so simple. Participants could choose either (A) $6 or (B) $5 for themselves, but the payoffs to the other participant were uncertain. A coin flip determined whether (A) gave $1 to the other participant and (B) gave $5 (as in the above condition) or (A) gave $5 to the other participant and (B) gave $1, so that the selfish option was also generous. Participants faced with this choice often refused free information about how the coin flip resulted and chose (A). In other words, they did not want information that might make them feel compelled to be fair and remained ignorant so they could be more selfish.

Such results are important for economic theory, which holds that people should not refuse costless information. They are also important for understanding ethical decisions. Of course, such experiments are much simpler than the decisions we face in life, but they lend important insights. There are nearly endless applications of the idea of “strategic ignorance” described above, whereby people refuse information so that they are not constrained by ethics - either their own ethical standards or by sanctions from others for being unethical. Consider three examples: 1) Financial scandals like the Enron or HP cases point out the difficulty of assigning culpability. Indictments and convictions rest on demonstrating knowledge of impropriety. Of course, executives will often take care not to know certain organizational details so that they may always plausibly deny responsibility for corporate actions. 2) People are encouraged to get tested for HIV so that its spread may be stopped. We should not naively assume that people would want such tests even if they were free, because the test takers risk having to change their lifestyles upon receipt of the results. 3) Steroid use in college and high school football programs is a widespread problem. Coaches will often tell players to “bulk up” or get their bodys “where they need to be” in ways that are hardly possible. These coaches may insist on not wanting to know how this bulk up occurs, perhaps deflecting responsibility onto players to give each other “training tips.” Modeling decisions like these as laboratory games gives us a tractable way of investigating them.

Students in the PPE program gain normative perspectives on decision making through economics and normative perspectives on ethics through philosophy. In my seminars, students will gain exposure to experiments from economics and psychology and learn how empirical realities about behavior complement theory. For example, a student with this training would be able to design sound policy mechanisms that accord not only with theory, but with how human beings operate. Interested students may have opportunities to pursue behavioral issues further by getting involved in research in my laboratory, where we maintain a network of computers suited to test how people interact in strategic situations.