

Undergraduate wins scholarship for graduate studies at Oxford

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Kevin Tobia recently learned he is one of only 15 students worldwide to study at Oxford University on the Ahmet Ertegun Scholarship, a new scholarship named after Ahmet Ertegun, who founded Atlantic Records.

Tobia, a School of Arts and Sciences senior, said he has researched the influence of intuitions, or gut instincts, on ethical decision since his junior year.

His work has earned him a scholarship designed to support graduate study and leading scholars in the humanities, said Arthur Casciato, director of Distinguished Fellowships at the University.

"It's every bit as exciting as it must have been to have had one of your students selected for a Rhodes scholarship in its first year," Casciato said.

After applying and being accepted to Oxford, a committee made up of the head of the Oxford's Division of Humanities and other academics selected Tobia for the award, Casciato said.

"Their emphasis is getting the best people who apply to Oxford to [come] to Oxford," he said. "It's a real breakthrough to have a Rutgers student among the first class of Ertegun scholars."

Tobia said he applied immediately when he received an email from Oxford in February announcing the new scholarship, which covers the cost of tuition and provides a living stipend for the two-year program.

Tobia's research first made headlines while he worked as an assistant for Stephen Stich, a philosophy professor at the University. Stich said Tobia began working with him in his concentration of experimental philosophy, which focuses on how demographic differences affect ethical judgment.

Tobia said he conducted his first study during his junior year, where he researched how framing a questionnaire in the first or third person would affect judgments in philosophers and non-philosophers.

But the study stalled when regional philosophy meetings could not provide a large enough sampling of philosophers.

Tobia then approached the division presidents of the American Philosophical Association for permission to conduct research at division conferences, he said.

After being rejected by two divisions, the president of the pacific division allowed him to participate, and Tobia soon flew out to California to conduct his study.

Tobia, who interviewed nearly 300 philosophers, said he was fortunate enough that Aresty Research Center provided him with \$5 gift cards to hand out to people who took his survey.

"I just hit them up at the registration line [to get into the conference]," Tobia says. "The offer of a free cup of coffee later was enticing."

Stich said Tobia used clever thought experiments to analyze how the intuitions of professional philosophers affected judgment compared to non-philosophers. The experiments revealed that both groups reacted along the same lines.

"He was a real pioneer ... and when the results circulated, people's jaws dropped," Stich said, adding that when Tobia posted his first paper on the Social Science Research Network it was the most popular paper for almost 10 weeks.

One of the first studies conducted years ago also found that gender, race and cultural differences influence philosophical judgments, Stich says.

It is an uncommon thing for philosophers to go out and do studies, and there has been criticism, Tobia said.

There is a tendency in philosophical literature to say that experimental philosophy, which primarily uses undergraduate students and non-philosophers as subjects, did not pose any challenges because the subjects were not experts.

“[The prevailing notion was that] if you want to go about a theorem in mathematics, you wouldn’t go to an undergraduate, you’d go to an expert. So why not in philosophy?” Stich said.

If his research showed that something totally irrelevant might affect one’s response to questions of ethical dilemma, Tobia said they would present a challenge for using intuitions in philosophy.

Tobia said his paper is popular within the philosophy community partly because the topic is so contentious and generally misunderstood.

“It’s not saying that philosophers aren’t experts, period. It’s saying that philosophers aren’t or might not be experts in intuition,” he said.