In a Pizza & Prof presented on November 9, Erik Cheries, Assistant Professor of Psychological and Brain Sciences, discussed the origins of moral intuitions. Cheries is the laboratory director of the Infant Cognition Lab at UMass. The lab conducts research with infants to help discover what thinking is like early on in development.

During the discussion held in John Adams Residence Hall, Cheries encouraged students to think critically about how humans make moral judgments. Through the use of the Trolley Problem, an experiment in ethics, he challenged students to analyze the ideas of moral conundrums and understand how the human brain works through issues in an attempt to solve them. He introduced the concept of "moral dumbfounding," the idea that moral judgments and actions are caused more by instinct than by reason. Although infants do not have the mental capability to work through the complexities of the Trolley Problem or moral dumbfounding, Cheries’ research reveals infants’ ability to problem solve.

The research suggests that from an early age, humans have the capacity to differentiate between right and wrong and seek out individuals who attempt to help others. The studies performed in the Infant Cognition Lab examine these kinds of questions of early development to help give insight into how our own minds work.
Professor Cheries encouraged undergraduate psychology majors interested in this research to apply for a research assistant position in the Infant Cognition Lab.

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