

IBH 1BC3 – Fundamentals of Ethics

Fall 2025

Fridays 2:30-5:20 pm

COURSE OBJECTIVES

By the end of this course, you should possess a basic familiarity with different ethical frameworks and their implications for contemporary ethical issues. You will have developed an ability to:

1. Demonstrate knowledge of ethical theories and frameworks;
2. Explain how theory can help to understand complex ethical problems;
3. Build connections between course content and current events and debates;
4. Critically assess the strengths and weaknesses of arguments in order to make reasoned arguments and engage in productive discussions;
5. Cultivate critical and thoughtful engagement practices (such as close reading, critical thinking, and communication skills) within and beyond the classroom;
6. Continually reflect on your learnings (i.e., personal growth, ethical reasoning, and leadership development).

Every aspect of this course is designed to help you successfully complete the learning objectives. Some resources/tools have been developed by Hawwa Khan and Harsh Shah with funding from the Student Partner's Program (MacPherson Institute).

INSTRUCTOR AND CONTACT INFORMATION

Instructor: Dr. Kerry O'Neill

Email: oneillke@mcmaster.ca oneillke [at] mcmaster [dot] ca

Office Hours and Location: Thursdays 12:30-2:00 pm; UH 306

Teaching Assistant: Nigel Freno

TA Office Hours & Email: TBC; frenon@mcmaster.ca

Course Website: <https://avenue.mcmaster.ca/>

COURSE ELEMENTS

Credit Value:	3	Leadership:	Yes	IT skills:	Yes	Global view:	Yes
A2L:	Yes	Ethics:	Yes	Numeracy:	No	Written skills:	Yes
Participation:	Yes	Innovation:	No	Group work:	Yes	Oral skills:	Yes
Evidence-based:	Yes	Experiential:	No	Final Exam:	No	Guest speaker:	No

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course provides a general introduction to ethical theory as well as issues in applied ethics. The course is divided into two parts (a) introduction to ethical and moral theory, and (b) an examination of current ethical issues and debates. In the first part of the course, you will become familiar with ethical theory. Questions to be considered include: What is the purpose of ethics? Is morality grounded in culture or religion? How can we determine right from wrong?

In the second part of the course, you will deploy your knowledge of ethical theories to examine a number of contemporary topics in applied ethics. Questions to be considered may include: When, if at all, is it morally permissible to commodify our bodies? Who, if anyone is morally obligated to respond to global poverty and climate change?

BASIC COURSE FORMAT

This course meets on Fridays 2:30-5:20 pm. Our meetings will involve a mix of lecture, groupwork, and discussions. You are expected to come to class prepared to discuss the assigned materials. You should come to class with any questions and/or concerns you have about the readings. Our classes will not be recorded or provided in hybrid format.

COURSE MATERIALS AND READINGS

There is one required textbook for this course:

1. Daniel R. DeNicola. *Moral Philosophy: A Contemporary Introduction* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2019).

The DeNicola book is available for purchase through the campus store. You may also purchase the book directly from Broadview Press [here](#). To succeed in this course, you will need to purchase this book as it will be used extensively. All other readings will be placed on our course website.

Course Website: This course will be on Avenue to Learn (<https://avenue.mcmaster.ca/>). The Avenue to Learn course page will act as the main hub for all course information. Along with the course syllabus, all other materials and resources used in this course will be placed on the Avenue page. It is there that you will find writing advice, citation guidelines, supplemental readings, assignment instructions, discussion boards, and course announcements. You will also submit all written assignments through Avenue. Please check our Avenue page on a regular basis to ensure you are up-to-date in course material.

EVALUATION

This course uses a non-standard grading methodology.

Students with accommodations are encouraged to speak with the instructor at the start of term.

Unlike other courses you take this term – and likely, most other classrooms you’ve been in – our course will **NOT** assign grades in the traditional mode, where you are given a number/letter grade based on the assessed quality of work you submit. Instead, **YOU** determine your grade for this course by fulfilling the bundle of assignments correlated to the base-grade you wish to achieve. This method aims to meet you where you are at in your learning and encourages you to set and achieve your own learning goals. The advantage of specifications grading or “specs grading” is that you, the student, decide how much work you wish to do this term. If you complete your work on time and satisfactorily, you will receive the base grade you are pursuing.

This means planning ahead, thinking about all your obligations and responsibilities this term, and also determining what grade you want or need in this course. I respect the student who only needs a C-, who has other obligations that preclude doing all the requirements to earn an A in the course, and who successfully completes the work needed to earn the C- grade. *This is a major life skill: taking responsibility for one’s own project management and workflow.*

All of your assignments are graded against a specific set of specifications as either “Satisfactory” (SAT) or “Needs Improvement” (NI). There are no points or percentages allocated to any individual item of work. Detailed instructions (“specifications”) for each assignment are provided on Avenue.

For many of the course assignments, you have flexibility in how many you choose to complete and when you complete them. Some assignments allow you the opportunity to revise and resubmit work deemed in need of improvement. Writing well and developing effective arguments are skills learned over time – and only ever with practice. Remember, learning is not about being perfect and never making mistakes. The best learning happens when we are able to understand our mistakes and act on them. Thus, revising one’s work is a key part of learning and improving.

Your final grade for the term is based on your satisfactory completion of a bundle of assignments (i.e., received a grade of “SAT” on all required items) as follows (shading indicates additions to the previous grade level):

BASE GRADE REQUIREMENTS

C-

Introductory profile

“Specs” Quiz

4 Learning Journals

Midterm Assignment

8 In-class Reflections

5 Reading Responses

No more than 4 unexcused absences

B-

Introductory profile

“Specs” Quiz

4 Satisfactory Learning Journals

Midterm Assignment

9 In-Class Reflections

7 Reading Responses

No more than **3** unexcused absences

A-

Introductory profile

“Specs” Quiz

4 Satisfactory Learning Journals

Midterm Assignment

10 In-Class Reflections

9 Reading Responses

Essay Proposal

Essay

No more than **2** unexcused absences

Tokens

Final grades are computed from Base Grades plus/minus your token balance at the end of term.

You earn tokens by:

- Demonstrating a high degree of diligence in the completion of an assignment by producing work of exceptional quality or insight (1 token)
- Completing extra work (1 token)
 - E.g., additional SAT Reading Responses and/or In-Class Reflections, or Extra Credit Assignments
- Attending writing/academic skills workshops/appointments for coursework at the [Student Success Centre](#) (1 token per visit)

A token can be exchanged for any of the following:

- A one-day extension of the deadline for some assignments (1 token/assignment)
 - Students registered with SAS or facing extenuating circumstances should contact the professor about their extension. Students who are granted an extension by the instructor on medical or personal/compassionate grounds will not need to exchange tokens to receive extra time.
- A re-do of an eligible assignment assessed as Needs Improvement (1 token)
 - Not all assignments are eligible for resubmission. To resubmit an eligible assignment, you must have made a *good faith attempt* to complete the assignment as instructed.

You lose tokens for:

- Careless errors (e.g., broken links; failure to proofread, improper citation formatting etc.) in otherwise SAT assignments (1 token)

- Engaging in non-collegial behaviours including, but not limited to, dominating discussion; hostile behaviours; overt rudeness; bored body language; speaking over others; ideas presented demonstrate you have not done the assigned readings or prepared for class; working on coursework for other courses during seminar (2 tokens)

You can “overdraw tokens” (i.e., spend tokens you do not have), but this will factor into the calculation of your final grade.

****If you see this, email me before the start of our first class to claim a one token credit.***

Your token balance will be released as part of the feedback after Check-Ins. Contact the instructor/TA if, at any point, you are curious about your token balance and we will provide your to-date token balance.

A note on extensions: Typically, students do not need to reach out to the instructor/TA to request an extension. Students registered with SAS or facing extenuating/emergent circumstances should contact the professor directly to request an extension.

Calculation of Final Grade

Your final grade is calculated from the basic grade you achieve plus your term-end token balance according to the chart below:

Basic Grade	Token Balance	Final Grade
C-	<2	C-
	2- 5	C
	6 - 8	C+
	9+	B-
B-	>4	B-
	4 - 6	B
	7 - 11	B+
	12+	A-
A-	<6	A-
	6 - 13	A
	14+	A+

A failure to satisfactorily complete all the required assignments for a C- base grade will result in a grade of D. D grade standing with a negative term-end token balance will result in a final grade of F.

Assignments

*Detailed instructions for all assignments, including the specifications, are posted to Avenue.

** Students with accommodations are encouraged to speak with me at the start of term.

*** Unless otherwise indicated (i.e., for Reading Responses), assignment dropboxes automatically close 7 days after the original due date. Assignments will not be accepted once the dropbox has closed, except with special permission from the course instructor on **legitimate** medical or compassionate grounds. Students who are granted an extension by the instructor on medical or personal/compassionate grounds will not need to exchange any tokens to receive the extra time.

Portfolio Check-In

There will be four reviews of your work throughout the term. The expected content to be added at each check-in varies according to your Basic Grade stream as follows:

		Reading Response			Other Entries
		A	B	C	
1	Sept. 12	1	1	1	Introductory Profile, Learning Journal, "Specs Quiz"
2	Oct. 10	3	3	2	Learning Journal
3	Nov. 14	3	3	1	Learning Journal, Midterm Assignment, Essay Proposal*
4	Dec. 12	2	-	-	Learning Journal, Final Paper*
Total		9	7	5	

NOTE: The In-Class Reflections are completed during class and so are not submitted at the Check-Ins. As part of your Check-In feedback, you will be told how many SAT In-Class Reflections you have completed to date.

*These assignments are only required for those pursuing the A-base grade.

Learning Journal

At each Check-In, you are required to write a Learning Journal Entry. A series of questions is posted on Avenue for each Check-In. You are encouraged to take notes throughout the term that highlight specific learnings or points of interest from our discussions. In all cases, including relevant references to or artifacts from other courses, media, or current events is highly encouraged.

Extensions are allowed in exchange for tokens. You do not need to ask for an extension. Submissions received after the check-in will automatically have the tokens deducted. Learning Journals are eligible for resubmission.

"Specs" Quiz

Due at Check-In 1 (Sept. 12)

All students are required to complete the short quiz on specifications grading and the course syllabus. Students can retake the quiz as many times as needed to pass the quiz.

In-Class Reflections

Submitted during class each week

The number of satisfactory In-Class Reflections you are required to produce depends upon the base-grade you want to pursue (see above). A reflection prompt will be provided during class, and students will have 10 minutes to write their response. Reflections will be collected during class.

Reading Responses

Due at 11:59 pm on Thursdays

The number of satisfactory reading responses you are required to produce depends upon the base-grade you want to pursue (see above). Each reading response should be no more than 1 page (**single-spaced**) in length. Prompts will be posted. Critical reading responses **ARE** eligible for re-submission. No extensions are allowed.

Midterm Assignment

Due at Check-In 3 (Nov. 14)

Students will submit a midterm assignment assessing and applying one of the moral theories discussed in class. This assignment is eligible for extension and re-submission.

Essay Proposal

Due at Check-In 3 (Nov. 14)

This assignment is optional. It is only required if you are seeking an **A-base grade**. Students will submit a short essay proposal for their final paper. Proposals are eligible for extensions and resubmission.

Final Paper

Due at Check-In 4 (Dec. 12)

This assignment is optional. It is only required if you are seeking an **A-base grade**. Consequently, the expectation for a SAT is very high – an A grade assignment or better. This assignment is eligible for extension but **not** resubmission.

EMAIL POLICY & OFFICE HOURS

Any questions received over email may take me up to two business days to respond. If you do not receive a response within two business days, please send your question again. **When writing to me, please use the course title as the subject line and use your full name to identify yourself.** Failure to include this information will result in delayed responses. According to McMaster policy, you must use your McMaster email address for these communications.

I do not respond to questions about course content via email. It is much easier to discuss these sorts of topics face-to-face. If you do email me with questions about course content, you will likely be asked to drop by my or the TA's office hours.

I hold weekly office hours (see above for dates/times/location). This time is specifically designated for students who wish to speak with me. You are all strongly encouraged to make use of office hours, early and often.

You are always welcome to drop by office hours to say hello or to speak with me about:

- Questions regarding the course (or philosophy more generally), the program, campus supports, and/or mentoring about related career paths;
- Issues of a personal matter that might impact your success in the course;
- Requests for additional supports for/feedback on course assessments; and/or
- Sharing your interests, connections, and ideas about what we learn in class.

TURNITIN

In this course we will be using a web-based service (Turnitin.com) to reveal plagiarism. Students will be expected to submit their work electronically to Turnitin.com and in hard copy so that it can be checked for academic dishonesty. Students who do not wish to submit their work to Turnitin.com must still submit a copy to the instructor. No penalty will be assigned to a student who does not submit work to Turnitin.com. All submitted work is subject to normal verification that standards of academic integrity have been upheld (e.g., on-line search, etc.). To see the Turnitin.com Policy, please go to www.mcmaster.ca/academicintegrity.

GENERATIVE AI: USE PROHIBITED

Students are not permitted to use generative AI in this course. In alignment with McMaster academic integrity policy, it “shall be an offence knowingly to ... submit academic work for assessment that was purchased or acquired from another source”. This includes work created by generative AI tools. Also state in the policy is the following, “Contract Cheating is the act of “outsourcing of student work to third parties” (Lancaster & Clarke, 2016, p. 639) with or without payment.” Using Generative AI tools is a form of contract cheating. Charges of academic dishonesty will be brought forward to the Office of Academic Integrity.

CONDUCT EXPECTATIONS

In our structured and unstructured discussions and dialogues, we will have many opportunities to explore some challenging, high-stakes issues and increase our understanding of different perspectives. Our conversations may not always be easy; we will sometimes make mistakes in our speaking and our listening; sometimes we will need patience or courage or imagination or any number of qualities in combination to engage our texts, our classmates, and our own ideas and experiences. Always we will need respect for others.

Everyone is expected to help create an environment conducive to effective teaching and learning for **all** participants. Behaviour that disrupts teaching and learning is unacceptable; accordingly, all face-to-face or online interaction should be civilized, respectful, and relevant to the topic. Diverse opinions and engaging argumentation are critical to the higher learning endeavour, but inappropriate behaviour that disrespects others (e.g., instructor, TA, classmates etc.) or inhibits learning will result in sanctions, including but not limited to removal from the classroom and/or the course.

Inappropriate behaviours include, but are not limited to:

- Disrespecting others (e.g., personal attacks, offensive/demeaning comments of any kind, snide remarks, disrespectful facial expressions, eye-rolling, frequent swearing etc.)
- Loud and/or frequent side conversations
- Dominating classroom discussions
- Frequently interrupting others
- Aggressively challenging others (e.g., yelling, cursing, or engaging in otherwise aggressive behaviours)
- Appearing under the influence of drugs or alcohol
- Sending multiple emails with one sentence; emails in all capital letters or that use name-calling, profanity, snide remarks, or rants.

Serious or habitual offenses will result in referral to the Chair/Director, the Associate Vice-President (Students and Learning) and Dean of Students, Student Affairs, Security Services, and/or Student Wellness.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COURSE POLICIES

Your enrollment in IBH 1BC3 will be considered an implicit acknowledgement of the course policies above or of policies announcement during lecture and/or on Avenue. It is your responsibility to read this course outline, to familiarize yourself with the course policies and to act accordingly. Lack of awareness of the course policies cannot be invoked at any point during this course for failure to meet them. It is your responsibility to ask for clarification on any policies that you do not understand.

COURSE SCHEDULE

The reading load will usually be between 20-30 pages per week. The readings for some weeks may be longer.

<u>WEEK</u>	<u>DATE</u>	<u>TOPIC</u>	<u>READING</u>
1	Sept. 5	Syllabus & Course Introductions	N/A
2	Sept. 12	Introduction to Ethics	DeNicola Chapter 1
3	Sept. 19	Ethics, Religion, and Culture	DeNicola Chapters 2 & 3
4	Sept. 26	Ethics & Egoism	DeNicola Chapter 5
5	Oct. 3	Utilitarianism	DeNicola Chapter 6
6	Oct. 10	Kantianism	DeNicola Chapter 7
7	Oct. 17	READING WEEK	N/A
8	Oct. 24	Contract Theory	DeNicola Chapter 8 Rawls, John. "A Theory of Justice." In <i>A Reader in Moral Philosophy</i> , edited by Daniel R. DeNicola, 215-223. Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2022.
9	Oct. 31	Distributive Justice	Lamont, Julian and Christi Favor, "Distributive Justice", <i>The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy</i> (Winter 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/justice-distributive/ .
10	Nov. 7	Global Poverty	Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," <i>Philosophy & Public Affairs</i> 1, no. 3 (1972): 229-243.
11	Nov. 14	Ethics of Sex	Srinivasan, Amia. "On Not Sleeping with Your Students." In <i>The Right to Sex: Feminism in the Twenty-First Century</i> , 123-148. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021.
12	Nov. 21	Environmental Ethics	Rieder, Travis. <i>Catastrophe Ethics: How to Choose Well in a World of Tough Choices</i> . New York: Dutton, 2024. (excerpt pages 13-40)

13	Nov. 28	Moral Limits of Markets	<p>Michael Sandel, "What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of the Market," Tanner Lectures on Human Values, 1998, 89-103.</p> <p>Jason Brennan and Peter Jaworski, <i>Markets Without Limits: Moral Virtues and Commercial Interests</i> (New York: Routledge, 2016), 3-18.</p>
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The instructor reserves the right to modify the syllabus. In the event of a discrepancy between the syllabus posted on Simple Syllabus and Avenue to Learn, the Avenue to Learn syllabus will be final.