

**McMASTER DIVINITY COLLEGE**  
**PROFESSIONAL ETHICS**  
**Hybrid (Online only this term)**  
**Course Code: MS5YE5/6YE6**

**Term:** Spring 2021 (May 3<sup>rd</sup> to June 4<sup>th</sup>, condensed session)  
**Instructor:** Dr. Jason C. Robinson, BA, BRE, MA, MTS, MA, PH.D.  
**Email:** robinjc@mcmaster.ca  
**Office Hours:** By appointment

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**Course Description:**

Professional ethics is a branch of applied ethics. Professional ethics focuses on the behaviour expected by professionals, such as in medicine, business, education, counselling and ministry. Professional ethics raises questions about what ethical standards or rules ought to govern professionals providing specialized services to the public. This course introduces students to the general study of ethics, and to professional and applied ethics specifically. Topics include: professional duties, clients' rights, honesty, privacy and confidentiality, integrity and trust issues, social responsibility, conflicts of interest and government regulations.

**Expanded Course Description:**

Questions in professional ethics are based in religious, political, and cultural beliefs about how humans ought to act. The diversity of opinion on these matters makes determining professional ethics very difficult. Questions we will consider include: Do professionals—specialized people with privileged roles in society—have the same moral obligations as the layperson or are there extra moral responsibilities? Is it enough to follow the law, or should professionals have a higher moral standard beyond the letter of the law? What might that look like? What should one do if the law and one's moral beliefs conflict? Are members of one professional field morally obligated in the same way as another, e.g., medicine the same as business; counselling the same as law? In what ways does a Christian form of professional ethics create different practices, questions, and requirements that a purely secular form does not? Should professional bodies regulate their own professions, or should there be an overarching (interdisciplinary/trans-professional) standard of correct conduct? How might one develop a universal professional ethics?

**Course Objectives:**

*Knowing*

- By the end of this course students will possess greater knowledge of professional ethics in the modern world.

*Being*

- Through an examination of major ethical questions, students will be encouraged to develop their own ethical way of life that embodies Christian values such as honesty, integrity, respect, and accountability.

*Doing*



- By the end of this course students will be able to apply theologically-grounded ethical principles to life and ministry contexts across the professions.

**Required Text:**

- Clancy Martin, Wayne Vaught, Robert Solomon. *Ethics Across the Professions: A Reader for Professional Ethics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. ISBN: 9780190298708
- Long, D. Stephen. *Christian Ethics: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. ISBN: 9780199568864

All required textbooks for this class are available from the College's book service, READ On Bookstore, Room 145, McMaster Divinity College. Texts may be purchased on the first day of class. For advance purchase, you may contact READ On Bookstore, 5 International Blvd, Etobicoke, Ontario M9W 6H3: phone 416.620.2934; fax 416.622.2308; email books@readon.ca. Other book services may also carry the texts.

**Modules, Topics and Schedule of Dates:**

Module and Week	Topics	Activities and Readings
<b>Module 1</b> Week of May 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ What Is It to Be a Professional?</li> <li>▪ The Professions, Leadership, and Work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <u>Synchronous online meeting <b>May 5<sup>th</sup> (Wed. 3-5pm)</b></u> to discuss course and assignments.</li> <li>▪ Zoom invitation will be posted in A2L "Announcements" section 1 day before meeting.</li> </ul> <p><b>Readings</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Reading Long's <i>Christian Ethics</i>.</li> <li>▪ Chapter One of <i>Ethics Across the Professions</i></li> </ul> <p> Assignment, begin <b>discussion postings</b> (ongoing throughout term).</p>
<b>Module 2</b> Week of May 10 <sup>th</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Why Be Ethical?</li> <li>▪ Professional Duties, Clients' Rights</li> </ul>	<p><b>Readings</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Chapter Two of <i>Ethics Across the Professions</i></li> <li>▪ Chapter Three of <i>Ethics Across the Professions</i></li> </ul> <p> Assignment, <b>Critical Analysis and Summary</b>, due end of week <b>May 16<sup>th</sup></b>.</p>
<b>Module 3</b> Week of May 17 <sup>th</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Truth, Lies, and Deception</li> <li>▪ Confidentiality and Privacy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <u>Synchronous online meeting <b>May 19<sup>th</sup> (Wed. 3-5pm)</b></u> to review course content/themes.</li> <li>▪ Zoom invitation will be posted in A2L "Announcements" section 1 day before meeting.</li> </ul> <p><b>Readings</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Chapter Four of <i>Ethics Across the Professions</i></li> <li>▪ Chapter Five of <i>Ethics Across the Professions</i></li> </ul> <p>▪ Assignment, <b>Code of Conduct</b>, Due end of week <b>May 23<sup>rd</sup></b>.</p>

<b>Module 4</b> Week of May 24 <sup>th</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Whistleblowing and Responsibility</li> <li>▪ Professionalism and Social Responsibility</li> </ul>	<b>Readings</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Chapter Six of <i>Ethics Across the Professions</i></li> <li>▪ Chapter Seven of <i>Ethics Across the Professions</i></li> </ul>
<b>Module 5</b> Week of May 31 <sup>st</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Conflicts of Interest and Government Regulation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <u>Synchronous online meeting June 2<sup>nd</sup> (Wed. 3-5pm)</u> to review course content/themes.</li> <li>▪ Chapter Eight of <i>Ethics Across the Professions</i></li> <li>📅 Assignment, <b>Discussion Postings</b>, due <b>June 4<sup>th</sup></b>.</li> <li>📅 Assignment, <b>Major Paper</b>, due <b>June 18<sup>th</sup></b>.</li> </ul>

**Summary Course Requirements:**

<b>Assignments</b>	<b>Worth</b>
Critical Analysis and Summary Notes/Journal	15%
Discussion Postings (10%) and Class Participation (10%)	20%
Code of Conduct (profession/ministry context specific)	25%
Major Paper	40%

**(1) Critical Analysis and Summary Notes/Journal**

Students will read Stephen Long's *Christian Ethics* and make notes that both summarize, critically assess, and begin to apply **any two** of the four chapters.

*Instructions*

- The assignment is to be 2000-3000 words (excluding references).
  - Make each of the following three categories account for roughly 1/3 of the paper each.
- Summary
  - Take note of major themes.
  - What are the main arguments/points of the chapter?
  - Are there controversial issues or claims made?
- Critical analysis
  - How are you own views being challenged or changed?
  - What new questions are you encountering and why are those important to you?
  - Do you find anything particularly difficult and/or enlightening (revealing)?
- Application
  - How might some of the new ideas learned apply to your own context (vocation, congregation, life circumstance) in a meaningful way?

The purpose of this assignment is to engage students in introductory matters of Christian ethics, i.e., history, vocabulary, major issues, that may then, in the larger context of the course, be applied.

## **(2) Code of Conduct (profession/ministry specific)**

Write a 3500-4500 word (excluding references) code of conduct that addresses specific ethical problems you have (or are likely to) experienced in your profession. This is to be designed for an adult only audience (assume at least an undergraduate level of education for your audience). To help focus your work, have at least one practical application (case study) example that relates to a major problem covered in this course, e.g., privacy rights, trust, corporate responsibility. The practical example should be mostly or entirely fictional, allowing you to imagine ways in which your code of conduct might help resolve a workplace problem.

### *Instructions*

- Examine one major ethical issue from our *Ethics Across the Professions* textbook.
- Pick a topic that you believe is particularly relevant today, i.e., trust, privacy issues, government regulations.
- Research your topic in scholarly literature. How have scholars addressed this issue? How have they succeeded or failed in your reasoned judgment?
  - It is expected that you will consult a minimum of 10 sources.
  - Be sure to critically interact with sources, rather than merely state positions/ideas.
  - It is also expected that you will explore examples of professional codes of conduct to help guide your own. Please go beyond the examples provided in course notes (although those are a good starting point).
- Explain why it is a problem and how there are different ways of interpreting it (different theological, cultural, and biblical traditions).
  - How are people possibly acting unethically? What should one do instead? Explain why.
  - Try to briefly present two or three alternatives (interpretations) as space allows.
- Convince your hypothetical audience (professional peers, congregation, students, etc.) that your interpretation and response is most appropriate, i.e., argue “why” they should believe your position is superior to the others.
- Ultimately you want your audience to become informed but also directed toward possible courses of action that are meaningful.

## **(3) Discussion Postings and Class Participation**

Students are expected to provide a brief commentary on any part of the assigned reading for any five (5) chapters from our main textbook. Each one should be between 400-500 words. The commentary should pick one brief quote from the readings and then examine its meaning and significance. Is it interesting? Explain why? Is it important? How so? No research is expected beyond our texts. This is an opportunity to engage with the material you find most interesting.

- Posts are graded on whether you have engaged meaningfully/thoughtfully (rather than flippantly or irrelevantly) with course material. Each is graded as a pass or fail.
- Commentaries are worth 2% each for a total of 10% of the course.
- Due Dates: All posts must be uploaded to the relevant dropbox by 11:59pm on the last day of the term (see due dates above).

- Students may post early. It is recommended that you post early to avoid detracting from writing the major paper.
- Late posts cannot be accepted without medical/crisis-type justification.

### **Class Participation**

Active participation during our face-to-face classes is worth 10% of the course. Students will engage in controversial debates during class meetings. Students will be graded on contributions provided, rather than by physical attendance to class.

#### **(4) Major Paper** (7000-8000 words excluding references)

This is both a research and argumentation paper. It is expected that students will go beyond the lectures/notes by researching topics through scholarly materials. Each student will argue for a position (for or against something). In other words, merely describing an ethical problem as one might for an encyclopedia is insufficient. It is expected that students will fight for a position by being as persuasive as possible (i.e., giving reasons for “why” one should believe the author).

#### *Instructions*

- Your project must identify one major issue within the realm of professional ethics.
- It is recommended that you use subheadings in your paper that follow the suggested three sections below, but you are free to adjust/modify them as needed, e.g., adding more subheadings as needed to maintain clarity of structure.
- Sections (1) and (2) will be the largest sections.

- In the paper you will argue/explain:

(1) What is the problem/issue that needs to be addressed? E.g., privacy, trust, social responsibility.

- Why, specifically, should we care about this issue? What is the practical importance of exploring it?
- In other words, why does this possible element of ministry practice need to be addressed?
- Explain how the paper is rooted in a Practice Led-research approach.
- Explore why some institutions (e.g., religious, legal, political) have chosen to ignore this issue “historically,” e.g., because of inherent racism, sexism, corruption (power struggles/inequality).
- Has the church (in general, or your own community in particular) held a role in supporting unethical practices? Why has this been the case?

(2) Why is it difficult to resolve today?

- Are there “current” social, political, religious, theological reasons the problem remains unresolved?
- Are there social norms and stigmas that prevent a healthier, more ethical approach? Explore them and challenge them.

(3) How might we begin to solve it?

- Offer suggestions in terms of practical strategies toward resolution, e.g., education, funding, challenging social norms/stigmas, political lobbying.

- Offer a consideration of how new approaches to this practice can be employed in helping to address and improve ministry practice in this area.
  - Offer some reflection on the application of these ideas to your own ministry context (both in terms of the local church and also their ministry beyond the local church).
  - This section should offer strong consideration to the foundational theology of the practice of ministry under consideration:
    - are there dangerous theological motivations that prevent better—more ethical—action on the issue/topic;
    - how might we ground better ethical practices in theology, specifically, what should our foundations for professional action be?
    - articulate specific theological pillars/credal formulations that appeal to you.
- Be sure to write a paper on an issue that you “have not” previously worked on for this course.
  - Avoid quotes unless essential to your argument, and then only if thoroughly examined and critiqued.

Essential elements that should be present in all papers:

**(a)** a sustained treatment of the major issues (rather than sporadic comments on minor issues),

**(b)** an argument for or against a specific view (including a counterargument to whatever position is taken),

**(c)** clear evidence of research (e.g., peer-reviewed books, journal articles, book reviews),

*How much research?* You need however much it takes to be thorough, i.e., deep/complete/meaningful. It is expected that you will consult a minimum of **15-20 academic sources** on a topic. You should not be quoting at length from these. Avoid quotes unless essential!

**(d)** some connection between the material researched and a contemporary problem or issue it addresses (e.g., potentially solves) within your specialization/profession, and

**(e)** clear evidence of your own views and opinions being challenged (i.e., stating what you think, and then producing questions that challenge your views—in short, show that you are interacting with and thinking about the material sincerely).

- **Avoid most “common” online materials** (e.g., blogs, non-academic sites, anonymous websites). Good online material will be found, first and foremost, through a library’s subscription to online content. There is a lot of good material online but you need to be discerning. Is it peer-reviewed? Is it written by an academic? Is it accepted by other academics?
- **Avoid using lecture notes.**

### **Avenue to Learn**

The course modules can be accessed by registered students through McMaster University’s Avenue to Learn. Please sign up early and purchase the textbooks as soon as possible. For information on Avenue to Learn:

[http://avenue.mcmaster.ca/help/manuals/A\\_Quick\\_Guide\\_to\\_Avenue.pdf](http://avenue.mcmaster.ca/help/manuals/A_Quick_Guide_to_Avenue.pdf)

## **Policy Statements:**

### **Late Penalties**

Late assignments will receive 2% per day deductions.

### **Academic Honesty**

Academic dishonesty is a serious offence that may take any number of forms, including plagiarism, the submission of work that is not one's own or for which previous credit has been obtained, and/or unauthorized collaboration with other students. Academic dishonesty can result in severe consequences, e.g., failure of the assignment, failure of the course, a notation on one's academic transcript, and/or suspension or expulsion from the College. Students are responsible for understanding what constitutes academic dishonesty. Please refer to the Divinity College Statement on Academic Honesty ~ <http://www.mcmasterdivinity.ca/programs/rules-regulations>

### **Inclusive Language**

McMaster Divinity College uses inclusive language for human beings in worship services, student written materials, and all its publications. It is expected that inclusive language will be used in chapel services and all MDC assignments. In reference to biblical texts, the integrity of the original expressions and the names of God should be respected, but you will need to use gender-inclusive language for humans, and you will need to quote from a gender-inclusive version such as the following: NRSV (1989), NCV (1991), TEV/GNB/GNT (1992), CEV (1995), NLT (1996), TNIV (2005), and the Common English Bible (CEB 2011).

### **Sexual Harassment**

Sexual harassment is a violation of the integrity of persons in the form of unsolicited, unwelcome, verbal or physical behaviour, which discriminates on the basis of gender about a person's body, attire, gender, marital status or economic status. Among faculty, staff, and students, sexual harassment of any kind will not be tolerated.

### **College Style for Submission of Written Work**

All stylistic considerations (including but not limited to questions of formatting, footnotes, and bibliographic references) must conform to the McMaster Divinity College Style Guidelines for Essays and Theses <https://www.mcmasterdivinity.ca/sites/default/files/documents/mdcstyleguide.pdf>

Failure to observe appropriate form will result in grade reductions.

### **Disclaimer**

This syllabus is the property of the instructor and is prepared with currently available information. The instructor reserves the right to make changes and revisions up until the first day of class.

### **Mini Biography**

Jason C. Robinson, BA, BRE, MA, MA, MTS, Ph.D. (Guelph-McMaster-Laurier joint Ph.D. Programme)

Dr. Robinson has taught at several universities including Wilfrid Laurier University and York University. Robinson specializes in hermeneutics (theories of interpretation), 20th-century continental philosophy, philosophical theology, philosophy of religion, social and political thought, and ethics. His most recent book is in the philosophy of education, *Foundations of Education: A Social, Political, and Philosophical*

*Approach.* Other areas of research interest include interdisciplinary studies, the nature of time, and aesthetics. His current project, a co-authored book with Stanley Porter, is forthcoming through Routledge, *Active Hermeneutics: Situating an Interdisciplinary Account of Understanding*.