Business Ethics and Military Ethics:
A Study in Comparative Applied Ethics

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Abstract
In the past three decades, philosophers have delved into applied ethics, pursuing a surprisingly wide range of practically oriented normative questions, and a number of fields of applied ethical research and teaching are flourishing. There have, however, been few comparative studies of different fields in applied ethics, but such studies can, I believe, teach us something. Accordingly, this essay compares and contrasts business ethics and military ethics as distinct disciplinary or sub-disciplinary areas. The two subjects might appear to be worlds apart. Yet there are not only differences, but also intriguing similarities between them. Specifically, I discuss the skepticism that often greets the idea of both business ethics and military ethics, compare the emergence of the two as academic fields, and examine some pedagogical issues they face. I then try to put some central questions in both fields in fresh light by comparing and contrasting the goals and responsibilities of corporations and their managers, on one hand, and of the military and its officers, on the other.

Keywords: military ethics, business ethics, managerial responsibility, military officers, teaching

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Is Ethics Even Possible In These Areas?
As anyone who teaches or writes on either business ethics or military ethics knows, laypeople tend to view these subjects with skepticism or disbelief. They joke that the concept (business ethics/military ethics) is oxymoronic or that business (the military) certainly needs more ethics. Naturally, those who work in these fields regard these comments as ill-informed and, in a social context, simply shrug off them with a smile. But because analogous comments are rarely made to someone who teaches medical ethics, say, or environmental ethics, it may be worth asking why the layperson’s underlying question, Is ethics even possible in these areas?

But let’s turn this question around: Why might one think that it was not possible? To begin with, business, there is a widespread perception, at least regarding large enterprises, that business is a totally self-seeking, amoral activity, driven only by a concern for profit and lacking any intrinsic regard for employees, customers, suppliers, or society at large. Popular American novels and films frequently depict business leaders and the corporations they direct as villains—ruthless, greedy, and untroubled by ordinary moral scruples—while the daily news seems filled with stories of corrupt business conduct. It must be granted that such people and such companies exist, but the question is whether they represent the true, inescapable nature of business.

The problem with thinking that they do, with thinking that business is at its core a totally amoral activity, is that this view ignores the extent to which business activity presupposes adherence to certain elementary moral standards. Without widespread, if perhaps unconscious, compliance with certain norms, without some degree of trust, business could barely function. It would certainly fail if buy and sell transactions were not efficient or effective at providing society with the goods and services it needs or wants. Indeed, without some sense of ethics, business would descend into gangsterism. Those businesspersons who act unscrupulously attempt to take advantage of the ethical restraint and rule adherence of others, just as liars try to exploit the fact that communications are generally assumed to be truthful. These points may be simple, but they suffice to show that one cannot plausibly maintain that ethics and business have nothing to do with each other. This conclusion tallies with commonsense morality, which does not hesitate to identify and criticize some business conduct as wrongful—for example, when a company avoids paying vendors the money it owes them, misleads its stockholders about its financial condition, fails to provide customers with the goods or services they were led to believe they would receive, or loots the pension fund of its employees.

If skepticism about business ethics arises from business appearing to be a completely self-serving and egoistical enterprise, skepticism about military ethics arises because of the violence inherent in combat and the deadly, destructive, and inhumane nature of war itself.

How can there be anything ethical about it? As with ethics in business, though, further reflection suggests that morality can and does apply to war. First, almost every culture has thought that under some circumstances waging war would be, not merely imprudent, but wrong or irreligious. And the commonsense morality of most people today condemns some wars, such as those of national aggrandizement, as wicked and immoral while deeming others, such as wars of national defense, to be morally permissible or at least necessary evils. Second, throughout history the warriors of many, perhaps most, cultures have recognized certain restrictions on their conduct: Certain weapons, certain tactics, or certain ways of fighting have been considered dishonorable or even taboo. This, too, tallies with commonsense morality, which unambiguously repudiates certain ways of fighting, for example, the systematic use of rape as a terrorist military tactic. However, if these two points are correct, then one can quite sensibly ask, as military ethics does, (1) when if ever is it morally permissible to wage war and (2) if and when wars do break out, how is one permitted to fight them?

So ethical analysis and argument seem perfectly applicable to both business and war. But this fact by itself does not explain why business ethics and military ethics have become recognized and, indeed, flourishing fields of academic endeavor. Teaching and university life raise interesting ethical issues, and some people have written insightfully about them. As you will note, the origins of business ethics and military ethics as academic subjects, their institutional contexts, and the nature and purpose of education in schools of business, on the one hand, and military service academies, on the other.

Business Ethics and Military Ethics as Academic Subjects
Although the occasional course on ethics in business was offered before 1960, the number of undergraduate courses in business ethics increased in the late 1970s and early 1980s. These days such courses are commonplace, 1 On managerial versus engineering ethics, see Charles E. Harris, Jr., Michael S. Puritch, and Michael J. Rabins, Engineering Ethics: Cases and Concepts, 4th ed. (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth/Cengage Learning, 2009), pp. 172-175, and the works they cite.
2 The reflections that follow were stimulated by an academic year that I, a long-time teacher of business ethics, recently spent at the U. S. Naval Academy. I thank the Academy’s Vice Admiral James B. Stockdale Center for Ethical Leadership for its financial support and my colleagues at the Center for many valuable and stimulating conversations.
4 For two examples, see Victor David Hanson, The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece, 2nd ed. (Berkley: University of California Press, 2009), and David Wetham, Just Wars and Moral Victories: Surpise, Deception, and the Normative Framework of European War in the Later Middle Ages (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009).
6 Richard T. De George, ‘The Status of Business Ethics:
and most state and large private universities not only offer them, but also see such courses as an important and necessary component of the university curriculum. Furthermore, any self-respecting business school must appear to provide its students with some sort of ethical instruction, and undergraduate business majors are frequently required to take a separate course on business ethics, often taught by instructors from the philosophy department.

Once universities began offering business ethics courses, then textbooks soon appeared, along with academic conferences, professional societies, and specialized journals. This resulted in the more common academic pattern. Usually, a new area of scholarly study is first explored in professional articles and books and at conferences of specialists and is then further institutionalized as journals devoted to the field begin to appear, before the subject begins trickling into the undergraduate curriculum. In the case of business ethics, however, the demand for it as a subject of instruction came first. As this demand grew, and as more and more people found themselves teaching courses on business ethics, many of them became intellectually engaged by this new subject and began writing on the issues they are now researching in various conferences, or founding journals for publishing work in business ethics. So business ethics as a specialized academic subject was born as a spin-off of business ethics. That whence came the demand for university instruction in business ethics was a spin-off of the teaching of business ethics. But founding journals for publishing work in business ethics. And the founding of several large state universities not only account for the demand, but also for the development of a new field of business ethics.

Furthermore, any self-respecting business school must be seen to provide its students with some sort of ethical education. Indeed, it is likely to have an impact on those broader fields that go well beyond questions of war. By contrast, the leading work in business ethics, for example, on whistle-blowing or manipulative advertising has—rightly or wrongly—not yet been seen by other philosophers as contributing to important theoretical thinking about business ethics. The demand has also been less because far fewer people teach military ethics, a small but vigorous field, than business ethics. The demand has also been less because far fewer people teach military ethics than those who think that it is enough to exhort their students to act rightly and see little point in exposing themselves to the hazards of ethical technicalities. Likewise, in both cases, there are, no doubt, those at the academies who would think that advanced academic work should be so is obvious for those teaching in military ethics. By contrast, in my experience, philosophers who teach business ethics or even write on topics in business ethics seldom have much business experience or much contact with business leaders. However, many non-philosophers working in business schools also teach business ethics courses. That brings to mind the question of the relationship between ethical teaching at universities and the teaching at business schools.

But to return to the emergence of military ethics as a subject of academic work—firstly, what did America’s service academies begin teaching ethics to their cadets and midshipmen? This development is linked to the profound changes in curriculum that those institutions have undergone over the past forty years as they have transformed themselves from being, in essence, schools of engineering, navigation, and strategy into institutions of ethics. Because work on ethical issues in war has had more outlets, there has been less demand for specialized immortal or harmful business behavior by inculcating a sense of duty and honor (consider German military officers during World War II). And it is certainly true that the service academies’ enhanced concern with ethics followed in the wake of the Vietnam war and events such as the massacre at My Lai, which challenged the blithe assumption of many Americans that their country’s wars were always morally justified and its military personnel always upright.

As in the case of business ethics, larger social attitudes, no doubt, help to explain the importance that the service academies have come to assign to teaching ethics, to a lesser extent, to doing research on ethical issues of military ethics. The military, as an institution, is sensitive and responsive to the social and political currents that shape the society in which it operates. And it is certainly true that the service academies’ enhanced concern with ethics followed in the wake of the Vietnam war and events such as the massacre at My Lai, which challenged the blithe assumption of many Americans that their country’s wars were always morally justified and its military personnel always upright.

12 It is true, too, as an anonymous reviewer has pointed out, that military personnel are involved in a kind of double life—crippled, criminally without, apparently, disturbing their sense of duty and honor (consider German military officers during World War II).
in their conduct. Nevertheless, I tend to think that in contrast to business ethics the emergence of military ethics as a discipline, as a subfield of teaching and philosophical research, reflected developments that were to a significant extent organic or internal to changing ideas of military education and less a response to, or a reflection of, a perceived social need on the part of the public for more moral behavior by members of the armed forces. Although the Vietnam war tarnished the U.S. military, today it is a highly respected institution11 (a state of affairs that contrasts with popular attitudes toward big business and its leaders, which mix distrust and cynicism with admiration or worldly success). Even those Americans who have been critical of the wars their country has recently chosen to fight have not blamed them on the military or reproached it for fighting the wars it has been directed to fight.

Some Pedagogical Issues in the Two Fields

Business ethics presupposes something like the moral legitimacy or potential legitimacy of capitalism whereas military ethics assumes something like the moral legitimacy or potential legitimacy of some wars. Obviously, these presuppositions can be contested: Socialists would reject the former, and pacifists the latter. Both fields, however, take such objections seriously. Business ethics and war capitalism, for example, are not merely the concern of people who care about business ethics; they are not merely the concern of people who care about war. Likewise, any respectable course on military ethics assumes something like the moral legitimacy of the U.S. military, today it is a highly respected institution whereas military ethics assumes something like the moral legitimacy of the U.S. military. Business ethics presupposes something like the moral legitimacy of big business and its leaders, which mix distrust and cynicism with admiration or worldly success. As mentioned above, the same sort of point is often made with respect to ethical theory. Neither business students nor cadets and midshipmen, it is sometimes contended, need to be exposed to the intricacies of ethical theory. If they are to be real practitioners, the emphasis must be on practical and relevant. And this point is strengthened by the fact that almost all those who teach courses in applied ethics or contemporary moral problems complain about the difficulty of convincing students that they are to be able to deal effectively with the concrete and context specific problems they will end up encountering in their professional lives. No doubt, some courses in business ethics must do enough to prepare their students for the messy real world of moral decision making. There is in particular a tendency for instructors to focus on big, sexy issues at the expense of seemingly more humdrum matters, but this is not peculiar to business ethics. To the contrary, military ethics assumes something like the moral legitimacy of the U.S. military.

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Business, however, is a state of affairs that contrasts with popular attitudes toward big business and its leaders, which mix distrust and cynicism with admiration or worldly success. Even those Americans who have been critical of the wars their country has recently chosen to fight have not blamed them on the military or reproached it for fighting the wars it has been directed to fight.

13 Today the public has higher confidence in the military than in Congress, the press, the clergy, or colleges and universities, and young people are more likely to trust it to do the right thing than they are the Supreme Court, the president, Congress, the United Nations, the federal government, or the media. For example, Brian Orend, The Morality of War (Paterboroug, Ont: Broadview, 2006).


15 Obviously, we do not know that they will do better (nor do we know for certain that anything else we do in an ethics classroom will have beneficial long-term results.)
across the board. This institutional commitment to, and concern with, ethics is evident in a variety of ways. Here is one example: Although a team of professional philosophers at the U. S. Naval Academy teaches its required courses about business ethics, the bulk of discussion sections are led by officers or former officers who volunteer to teach them. The fact that people they respect, who have often seen combat and whose careers they aspire to emulate, are engaged in a clear message to young midshipmen about its relevance and importance. This contrasts strikingly with many secular universities, especially the large state universities. Although they all have statements about values, ethics, or social responsibility in their student learning objectives or institutional goals, those targets and objectives often appear to be largely window dressing, added on to satisfy external evaluators, but underwritten by little substantive institutional commitment to ethics education. Indeed, it is difficult to find a secular institution that requires all students to take an ethics course, taught by philosophers. And even when particular groups of students, for example business majors, are compelled to take ethics, this can be seen by them as just another seemingly arbitrary requirement, just another hurdle to be cleared to graduate. It is not, as far as something that lies at the core of their future profession. I do not, however, want to paint too rosy a picture of the ethics instruction at the military academies. It involves many of the same challenges that teachers of philosophy encounter elsewhere. Furthermore, some report that in practice Socratic dialogue and open, classroom discussion of challenging ethical issues tend to give way to the search for pre-approved answers. But even if this is or has been a problem, the situation will certainly continue to improve as the military academies employ, as is typical of the large state universities, both philosophers and other academics (often, these days, in leadership positions). Still, it is probably true that some in the military approach ethics education as a training issue, attempting to turn philosophy courses into something that preconditions officers, on the other. These topics involve issues that are central to business ethics and to military ethics. Analyzing them in comparative perspective should throw some fresh light on both fields.

Business, the Military, and Service to Society

Although people sometimes say that the job of the military is “to kill people and break things,” this is not what the military’s raison d’étre is to serve the state and the country it is presumed to represent. That and not violence, and certainly not killing and breaking for their own sake, is its ultimate purpose or goal. The military hopes, of course, as do all reflective people, that it is never called upon to do what is unjust—and hard moral decisions arise for the organization and for the individuals in it if it is—but the military is always attended by an ideal that is larger than itself. The latter is the ideal that the military is an instrument of the civil authorities. The latter determine the size, structure, and capacities of the military as well as its specific mission in society. The former, for example, defeating a guerrilla force in another country, propping up a failed state, or supplying humanitarian aid after a natural disaster. Given civilian control of the military, the military cannot act autonomously, or fully autonomously, in pursuing those objectives. These general points apply obviously to sub-units of the military as well, for example, to divisions and brigades. In a business organization, too, sub-units must follow instructions and carry out policies and directives from above. But business organizations as a whole are not subordinate to some higher authority; they are autonomous and free (subject to certain moral and legal constraints) to advance their own interests as they see fit.

To be sure, business provides the goods and services that are needed, and that is one of its purposes. However, on the most prevalent view these days, which harks back to Adam Smith, the provision of those goods and services is a side-effect of the pursuit of profit. The point of business activity is simply to make money. Outside of business ethics classrooms, this is the message that students frequently receive, implicitly or explicitly, from their business courses: Maximization of profit, or, alternatively, shareholder wealth, is a business’s only goal. Providing socially useful goods and services is only a means to that end (although, strictly speaking, neither necessary nor sufficient for it). Conservativ and liberal economists who believe that business should be treated as a self-regulating market system cannot flourish without widespread acceptance of certain elementary norms or moral rules, such as honesty and good faith. Does business have social or moral responsibilities above and beyond the pursuit of profit? Can the rules of the game be modified, or is the pursuit of profit an end in itself? How can we understand that the trick is to get the right laws and regulations and then to turn business loose. Some business theorists and probably most of those who teach business ethics believe, to the contrary, that businesses do have such responsibilities—responsibilities to employees, to suppliers and other business partners, to consumers, to the environment, and to the larger society—beyond what the law and the elementary norms of business practice require. The practical implications of the two views often coincide. That’s because those who believe that business has broad social or moral responsibilities also argue that companies who embrace those responsibilities tend to be more profitable than companies that do not whereas those who deny that companies have those responsibilities in the first place acknowledge that it may be in their interest to do so.

The thesis that businesses have responsibilities beyond attempting to maximize profit within the existing framework of law, regulation, and accepted business practice can be understood in two ways. The first is that these putative responsibilities are additional side- constraints on business activity, that is, additional restrictions on the pursuit of profit beyond those already laid down by law and customary business morality. The second is that business has, or should acknowledge itself as having, other goals besides the pursuit of profit, for example, providing certain goods or services or satisfying the interests of its customers. On the former view, then, business has a single goal (profit) although pursuit of it is subject to constraints beyond those implicit in the rules of the game. By analogy, one’s goal in playing tennis may be to win, even though one acknowledges various constraints, beyond those specified in the rule book, about what one may do to win. On the second view, business has a single goal as well, but it must pursue several different and independently valuable ends, balancing them as best it can. By analogy, in playing tennis one might be pursuing several goals at once—striving not just to win but also to exercise or have fun with friends—with none of these goals lexically prior to the others. If something like this held true of business, that is, if business were best understood as having multiple goals that are dependent of course, on exactly what those goals were understood to be—it’s role would no longer be defined by self-interest; it would...
have a service component to it.

There is a view of business activity that is more radical than this. Like the view with which I began, it sees business as having only one goal. However, this goal is not profit, but the provision of some good or service. For example, John Mackey, founder and CEO of Whole Foods, claims that customer happiness, not making a profit, is his company’s true end.25 In response to Milton Friedman’s famous dictum that “the social responsibility of business is to increase its profits,” Mackey argues that Whole Foods is simply maximizing its profits through providing consumers with a service they value, Mackey insists that his company does not treat customer satisfaction as a means to an end. Rather, it is the whole point of his business, the reason for it existence. Profitability is a side effect of pursuing that goal well. At the same time, profitability is a necessary means of continuing to pursue it effectively because a company that fails to make money will not be able to go on providing the goods and services that are its rationale for existing in the first place.

To summarize the discussion schematically, if A = producing a socially useful good or service, and B = making a profit, then there are three positions:

1. Business has only one goal: A is merely a means to B.
2. Business has at least two independent goals, A and B.
3. Business has only one goal: B is merely a means to A.

One might object that this scheme is too simplistic and ignores the possibility of more sophisticated variants of these positions. I can ignore this objection here, however, because I am not trying to settle the debate over the proper role and responsibilities of business, but rather to draw some broad comparisons between business and the military, and my schema suffices for that. As I argued above, the most significant common element is the service component to the organization — an activity the ultimate point of which is not self-interest but the social good.

The Contrasting Responsibilities of Managers and Officers

On views 2 and 3, managers obviously have broad responsibilities; by definition, in running a company they must have goals other than or in addition to maximizing profit. View 1, in contrast, seems to entail that profit is a manager’s only concern. But this is incorrect. Even if the sole purpose, point, or economic role of a corporation is to make money for its owners, it does not follow that maximizing a company’s returns is the only responsibility of managers. Managers are elected to run an organization, and there are legal restrictions and moral side-constraints on what corporations can do in the pursuit of profit. Economists differ about what those legal restrictions should be, and many hold that the state should not be the only body empowered to provide adequate guidance to the moral manager.

For example, John Mackey, founder and CEO of Whole Foods, sees business as having only one goal, which is not self-interest but the social good. Mackey insists that his company is not profit, but the provision of some good or service. This is not the only possible way of thinking about the rules of war, of course, but whatever view we take of these rules, they are sometimes one or other side of a conflict to refrain from acting in ways that could benefit it; that is, the rules may make victory more costly or more difficult than it would otherwise have been because they prohibit certain sorts of conduct. Similarly, even on the least restrictive version of view 1, a business will sometimes be required to forbear from making a profit in a certain way. On the other hand, of course, it will sometimes be required to do something that is contrary to the pursuit of profit, as it can be as a state or military organization, to forgo any short-term advantage that would come from breaking the rules of the game.

Generally speaking, however, are only human, and they sometimes allow short-term interests to trump long-term interests. Moreover, some business or military situations may be so asymmetrical that the dominant party has little reason to concern itself with reciprocity. It is possible that the rules are to be adhered to, thus benefiting everyone in the long run, then individuals will have to have internalized a commitment to them in business, but that internalization must be able to overcome financial temptation and the diffuseness of responsibility in large organizations. In the military, that internalization needs to be robust enough to withstand the heat of battle when emotion runs high, when decisions must be made quickly, and when the facts are shrouded in fog. It must also withstand the psychological proclivity to dehumanize one’s opponent and to disregard the safety and well-being of enemy civilians.

Still, two things make the task of inculcating a commitment to the rules of war firm enough to stand up under these conditions less daunting than it might otherwise seem. First, men and women in the military can be trained ahead of time to recognize that the rules of war that is, to act in accord with the rules of war, under battlefield conditions just as they are drilled to act without hesitation in other desirable ways. The military itself teaches that in peacetime, it teaches them that unlawful orders are to be refused, and it tries to assist officers in thinking through ahead of time the hard dilemmas that they can face in the field. In contrast, although businesses always try to ensure that their employees behave in ways the company wants, it is doubtful that many of them endeavor to strengthen their employees’ ability to make sound, independent moral decisions under duress or that the message that young managers end up getting has changed much from what Badaracco and Webb identified it to be back in the 1990s: “don’t break the law, but “don’t overinvest in ethical behavior,” either.27 True, some large corporations have ethics training programs, but—judged by the sorts of programs that filter down to the university—one suspects that they are more legalistic and compliance oriented. Second, as part of their professionalism, soldiers, sailors, marines, and air force personnel explicitly assume certain demanding moral responsibilities. The concepts of duty and honor loom large in their traditions, and they are well aware of the possibility of being called upon to sacrifice themselves for their country or for their comrades. For them to risk their lives, say, to safeguard their troops so that they can execute a military mission is a commitment to them. In business, that internalization will sometimes be required to forbear from making a profit in a certain way. On the other hand, of course, it will sometimes be required to do something that is contrary to the pursuit of profit, as it can be as a state or military organization, to forgo any short-term advantage that would come from breaking the rules of the game.

Military officers have even stronger duties to the organization and to cooperate actively and constructively in achieving its legitimate ends. The analogy with the fiduciary responsibilities of managers is obvious. View 1 holds that apart from the fiduciary duty always takes priority over other moral concerns. Managers are autonomous agents, and what they should or should not do is not something that we can derive directly from the goals, even as constrained by law and by elementary moral principles. The company of soldiers and marines, and air force personnel explicitly assume certain demanding moral responsibilities. The concepts of duty and honor loom large in their traditions, and they are well aware of the possibility of being called upon to sacrifice themselves for their country or for their comrades. For them to risk their lives, say, to protect their troops so that they can execute a military mission is a commitment to them. In business, that internalization will sometimes be required to forbear from making a profit in a certain way. On the other hand, of course, it will sometimes be required to do something that is contrary to the pursuit of profit, as it can be as a state or military organization, to forgo any short-term advantage that would come from breaking the rules of the game.

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from the moral coarsening that so often accompanies war; that is, they have a duty to help them retain their moral compass and preserve their identity as moral agents. There is nothing analogous to this in the world of business. All companies and all managers are concerned with how their employees act, but only very rarely with what kind of people they become, or risk becoming, as a result of working for the company.

Second, although the military ethos embraces sacrifice, it also stresses the importance of loyalty to one’s comrades. This can sometimes lead to military personnel being too concerned with “force protection,” that is, to fight within the rules of war, and that this is with preserving one’s unit or those under one’s command from excessive risk of harm. Admirable in itself and a healthy antidote to the indifference with which some past military leaders often squandered the lives of their own men, a concern with force protection can sometimes translate into a disinclination to take the risks that are necessary, say, to avoid placing civilians in harm’s way—or even the risks necessary for accomplishing the mission. One might see this as somewhat analogous to a manager’s allowing the stability of the interests of the people who work for him to blind him to other responsibilities, but this does not do justice to the strength of the obligation that officers have to look after the well-being of those in their command or the moral importance of loyalty. In some business situations, to be sure, one must balance responsibilities to co-workers or subordinates against other leadership responsibilities, but usually the stakes are lower and the ties of loyalty weaker than in the military.

Finally, everyone acknowledges that officers have serious in bello responsibilities. But what an officer is to do if he or she suspects, believes, or knows that what an officer, that is, to fight within the issues are not their ends by a despicable regime — an immoral for example, providing software to be used for whether the corporate project in which they participate is to this in business ethics. (One might, I suppose, debate among philosophers.

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Responsibilities in bello. But I know no one who actually rules [e.g., no one is cheated, misled, or bribed] — an in bello-like responsibility. But I know no one who actually holds this position.)

Conclusion

For the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, to study ethics was to study metaethics. That has changed for the better. Work on normative theory and on concrete or applied ethical problems now flourishes as it never has before. Indeed, a number of areas of applied ethics can be considered distinct, semi-autonomous academic fields, complete with professional societies, journals, conferences, undergraduate courses, and graduate students writing on cutting edge topics. But there have been few comparative studies of different fields in applied ethics. In the belief that such studies can teach us something, this essay has compared and contrasted business ethics and military ethics along several different dimensions. After responding to skepticism about whether ethics is even possible in these areas, I examined their origin and development as academic fields, some pedagogical issues that arise in these areas, and the contrasting goals and responsibilities of the military and its officers, on the one hand, and of corporations and their managers, on the other.

The emergence of business ethics as a specialized academic subject was largely a spin-off of the fact that so many universities began offering business ethics courses in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Now seen as an important aspect of their curriculum and of the mission of their schools of business, business ethics offerings expanded so rapidly, I believe, because of a perceived social need to instill a greater sense of ethical responsibility among America’s future business leaders. In the case of the military academies, the emergence of academic instruction in ethics probably reflected more internal developments as these institutions evolved into genuine undergraduate universities with an expanded liberal-arts view of officer education. With more military and civilian professors involved in teaching ethics, the community of those interested in issues in military ethics grew. Although a number of professional philosophers have been writing about the ethics of war since the 1970s, the growth of this community has stimulated more research and writing in the field, especially on applied or specialized topics. Both fields face similar pedagogical questions in finding the appropriate classroom balance between theoretical and practical or applied issues. Because it is much larger, the field of business ethics offers instructors a much wider range of possible pedagogical materials. The military academies, on the other hand, are more likely to have to put together their own materials. More significantly, ethics instruction in the two fields takes place in quite different institutional environments. The service academies take very seriously the ethical dimension of military leadership and place a high priority on developing the character and ethical reasoning ability of those in their charge. The seriousness and breadth, institutional nature of this commitment is not something that secular universities have been able to match. On the other hand, Socratic reflection and independent thinking about ethical matters fit more easily and naturally into a traditional university context.

Several intriguing contrasts between the two fields stem from the fact that whereas service to country is at the heart of the military’s identity, the purpose or proper social role of business is a contested matter, with conflicting views about the responsibilities of corporations and their managers. As we have seen, there is no consensus whether or to what extent business is required to do anything other than strive to make money within the rules of the game. To be sure, business managers have duties to the organization just as military officers do, and on any view of the social role or function of the corporation, managers have responsibilities that restrict what they may do on behalf of the organization. Nevertheless, although all those who teach business students wish them to act morally, morality is not usually thought to be at the core of what it is to be a good manager. By contrast, military ethics takes it for granted that the military is a service calling, which has a goal or purpose that is noble and transcends self-interest, and those who teach it emphasize that morality — uprightness, the exercise of moral judgment — lies at the very heart of what it is to be an officer.

28 This is not to imply that all questions of loyalty in the military involve dramatic or high-stakes situations. For example, should a soldier help cover up a buddy’s minor malfeasance?

29 For rival perspectives, see Michael Walzer, Just and Unjust Wars and Jeff McMahan, Killing in War.

30 Roughly speaking, from Moore’s Principia Ethica (1903) to Rawls’s A Theory of Justice (1971).

31 An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Sixth International Conference on Applied Ethics, held on October 28-30, 2011, at the Center for Applied Ethics and Philosophy, at Hokkaido University (Sapporo, Japan). I thank conference participants for their helpful comments.