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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

In the past three decades, philosophers have delved into applied ethics, pursuing a surprisingly wide range of practic ally 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.

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 waging war with 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 to be as efficient or effective as providing society with the goods and services it needs or wants. Indeed, without some sense of ethics, business would descend into gangsterism. Those businesses or the people who act unscrupulously attempt to take advantage of the ethical restraint and rules 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 of most people today condemns 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 businesses adhere to ethical norms 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 the importance of academic ethics, but academic ethics is not, or not yet anyway, a recognized academic field with courses in the subject, textbooks, journals, and a community of researchers. Let’s look, then, at the origins of business ethics and military ethics as academic subjects, their institutional contexts, and the nature and purpose of education ethics 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


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. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), and David Wetham, Just Wars and Moral Victories: Surprise, 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: 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?

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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 faced. They thus became the first conference organizers, editors of journals with a platform for it than has been the case for business ethics. Furthermore, any self-respecting business school must appear to provide its students with some sort of ethical instruction, and undergraduate business majors are required to take such a course. Finally, any academic institution that could be labeled business ethics.

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Michael Walzer’s 1977 book, Just and Unjust Wars,7 opened up an important realm of moral reflection that professional, academically trained philosophers had largely ignored. This came at a time when Anglo-American mores on the use of violence had, on a large scale, come under almost total preoccupation with metaethics. Rawls’s A Theory of Justice8 had recently put beyond doubt the importance and viability of substantive normative theorizing, and put it in a way that would be on the way to doing moral philosophy. Walzer’s work, despite its narrower focus, seemed to convey something of Rawls’s argument, that there are moral issues that could be labeled business ethics.

Although comparatively modest in size, the military ethics community is, proportionately speaking, more international in character than is the business ethics community. The interest in military teaching ethics at American military academies and their counterparts in other western countries. Unsurprisingly, both the military ethics and the business ethics communities have links with practitioners in their fields, that is, with business people and military personnel. That this should be so is obvious for those teaching in military academies. 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, and they tend to be on the corporate side. This is partly because they do tend to have links with people in business, including business leaders who care about social responsibility and ethics in business.

But to return to the emergence of military ethics as an academic subject, why 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, or aeronautics into institutions of professional, analytically trained philosophers had largely ignored. This came at a time when Anglo-American mores on the use of violence had, on a large scale, come under almost total preoccupation with metaethics. Rawls’s A Theory of Justice had recently put beyond doubt the importance and viability of substantive normative theorizing, and put it in a way that would be on the way to doing moral philosophy. Walzer’s work, despite its narrower focus, seemed to convey something of Rawls’s argument, that there are moral issues that could be labeled business ethics.

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 ethical issues in military education. 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 ethical issues in military education. 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 up right.


10 For example, Jeff McHalen, Killing in War (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

11 In particular, the International Society for Military Ethics.
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 institution^11 (a state of affairs that contrasts with popular attitudes toward big business and its leaders, which mix distrust and cynicism with admiration or to a 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. For example, business students and war capitalists, that is, businesspeople, are neither more nor less reflective than are their peers elsewhere. They are, perhaps, rather more likely to have imbibed the view that their future professions (business and warfare) are legitimate activities that we or perhaps they are simply inevitable activities that we are destined to play in the teaching of business or military ethics, the important thing, pedagogically speaking, is to find the right balance between theoretical and more practical or applied issues: after all, in both fields we want students 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 or war ethics do enough to prepare their students for the 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 nuts and bolts issues, for example, concerning the fair treatment of subordinates by their superiors. Related to this is the tendency for textbooks and other pedagogical materials to focus on ethical questions that can arise for managers, on the one hand, or officers, on the other, as opposed to the ethical choices that ordinary workers or enlisted personnel are likely to encounter. That’s natural, of course, because the ethical questions that come up for a country’s future business managers or military leaders and because those issues may seem more complex or more foundational than those that lower-level personnel are likely to run into. Still, both business and military ethics can and should encompass more than the moral quandaries that managers and officers can encounter. And even if that remains the focus, it is important for both future managers and future officers to be aware of some of the moral challenges that their subordinates can face and to rid themselves of the implicit assumption that it is their job to think and the job of their subordinates merely to obey.

As mentioned above, the same sort of point is 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 acquire the practical skills that are their job to think and the job of their subordinates to run into. Still, both business and military ethics can and should encompass more than the moral quandaries that managers and officers can encounter. And even if that remains the focus, it is important for both future managers and future officers to be aware of some of the moral challenges that their subordinates can face and to rid themselves of the implicit assumption that it is their job to think and the job of their subordinates merely to obey.

Business and military ethics, it may seem, are a variety of legitimate approaches and a range of possible topics to take up. In the case of business ethics, the market for teaching materials is so large that there is a wide assortment of pedagogical options for instructors. In addition to single-author texts and textbook anthologies, pitched at different levels, aimed at different kinds of students, and representing different approaches to the subject, there are various sources of case studies for classroom use as well as a diverse range of digital pedagogical resources online. By contrast, there are far fewer published teaching materials for use in courses on military ethics—a market that barely exists outside the military academies, though course materials or political philosophy often take up issues of war for part of the semester. In fact, there are hardly any traditional looking textbooks devoted to military ethics—although, to be sure, there are a number of good books on the morality of war, which although written for a wider audience could be used effectively in the classroom. There are also some large, historically oriented anthologies on the ethics of war. A valuable resource for professors, they are, however, probably not well suited to most undergraduate courses. To target their particular students, in fact, the service academies often develop or assemble their own teaching materials on ethics and war.

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To the practically minded, it may seem a waste of time to discuss with them possible moral justifications of either business or war. These are broad questions, well outside the potential decision-making province of students of either subject. Exposure to them, one might think, will not make them better businesspeople or better soldiers. As mentioned above, the same sort of point is 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 acquire the practical skills that are their job to think and the job of their subordinates merely to obey.

What should we be teaching these young people? To the practically minded, it may seem a waste of time to discuss with them possible moral justifications of either business or war. These are broad questions, well outside the potential decision-making province of students of either subject. Exposure to them, one might think, will not make them better businesspeople or better soldiers.

Second, between highly abstract ethical theories and the nuts and bolts issues, for example, concerning the fair treatment of subordinates by their superiors. Related to this is the tendency for textbooks and other pedagogical materials to focus on ethical questions that can arise for managers, on the one hand, or officers, on the other, as opposed to the ethical choices that ordinary workers or enlisted personnel are likely to encounter. That’s natural, of course, because the ethical questions that come up for a country’s future business managers or military leaders and because those issues may seem more complex or more foundational than those that lower-level personnel are likely to run into. Still, both business and military ethics can and should encompass more than the moral quandaries that managers and officers can encounter. And even if that remains the focus, it is important for both future managers and future officers to be aware of some of the moral challenges that their subordinates can face and to rid themselves of the implicit assumption that it is their job to think and the job of their subordinates merely to obey.

When it comes to teaching applied ethics, in general, or military or business ethics, in particular, there are a variety of legitimate approaches and a range

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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 are the Supreme Court, the president, Congress, the United Nations, the federal government, or the media. This change is partly due to the media’s increased willingness to criticize military action, but it is also a reflection of the military’s increased willingness to discuss its own actions and to be more open in general.


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.)


17 For example, Brian Orend, The Morality of War (Peterbor- ough, Ont.: Broadview, 2006).

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 sessions are led by officers or former officers who volunteer to teach them. The fact that people who respect, who have often seen combat and whose careers they aspire to emulate, a clear message to young midshipmen about its relevance and importance. This contrast stands by many secular universities, especially the large state universities. Although they all have statements about ethics, civic virtues, or social responsibility in their student learning objectives or institutional goals, those goals and objectives often appear to be largely window dressing, added on to satisfy external evaluators, but underwritten by little substantively 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 that has to be cleared on the way to their degree, not as something that lies at the core of their future profession. I do not, however, want to paint too rosy a picture of the military academies. It involves many of the same ethical chal-
genious or more, and perhaps particularly so in the military, where ethical challenges are met head on. Furthermore, some teachers of business ethics, who volunteer to teach elsewhere. Some of these challenges are met head on. Furthermore, some teachers of business ethics, who volunteer to teach elsewhere. Some of these challenges are met head on. Furthermore, some teachers of business ethics, who volunteer to teach elsewhere. Some of these challenges are met head on. Furthermore, some teachers of business ethics, who volunteer to teach elsewhere. Some of these challenges are met head on. Furthermore, some teachers of business ethics, who volunteer to teach elsewhere. Some of these challenges are met head on. Furthermore, some teachers of business ethics, who volunteer to teach elsewhere. Some of these challenges are met head on. Furthermore, some teachers of business ethics, who volunteer to teach elsewhere. Some of these challenges are met head on. 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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 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 “The Social Responsibility of Business is to increase its profits”26, 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 some 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, the proper role and responsibilities of business, as I perceive them, is one or other side to follow that pursuit of profit, even within the rules of the game, is their only moral responsibility or that their 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 market morality, of the company of which they are a part. 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. Although (1) the stakes can be considerably higher here than in business and (2) the organization that officers serve is itself premised on service and not, as view 1 would have it, on self-interest, the lesson is the same. Like managers, officers have a fiduciary duty to advance its interests and, in particular, to refrain from acting in ways that would not produce the best ends. This is not the only possible way of thinking about the rules of war, of course, but whatever view we take of these rules, it is obvious that they also govern long-term interests including one’s own.27 Military personnel can do it pursuit of the objectives they are given. Some of these restrictions are fairly detailed and legally codified, for example, those that govern the treatment of prisoners of war. Others are broader and their application to, or implications for, certain specific situations are often contestable, for example, the duty to respect civilian immunity or refrain from force that is out of proportion to its military objective. Still, the norms are real and widely accepted even if hard cases abound. The laws and norms that govern business behavior are, by definition, not self-interest but the social good. Economists and other business theorists debate whether having businesses operate within this or that framework will produce better results—although, as I have suggested, few of these debates are framed in terms of providing adequate guidance to the moral manager. Similarly, the rules of war do not provide clear answers to every moral problem an officer might encounter, and when they do provide answers, it is possible that morality might require more or, conceivably, less, than the rules of war do. The rules themselves, on one plausible view, are analogous to those that govern business in being norms or conventions that states have found in it their collective interest to adopt. Or to put it in a more explicitly utilitarian way: Given that wars will be fought, whatever philosophers say, then the task is to identify those rules that, given the world as it is and governments and people as they are, will bring about the most good, taking into account, among other things, the likelihood of states being brought to accept and comply with them.

Economists differ about what those legal restrictions on the conduct of war will produce better results—although, as I have suggested, few of these debates are framed in terms of providing adequate guidance to the moral manager. Similarly, the rules of war do not provide clear answers to every moral problem an officer might encounter, and when they do provide answers, it is possible that morality might require more or, conceivably, less, than the rules of war do. The rules themselves, on one plausible view, are analogous to those that govern business in being norms or conventions that states have found in it their collective interest to adopt. Or to put it in a more explicitly utilitarian way: Given that wars will be fought, whatever philosophers say, then the task is to identify those rules that, given the world as it is and governments and people as they are, will bring about the most good, taking into account, among other things, the likelihood of states being brought to accept and comply with them.

This is not the only possible way of thinking about the rules of war, of course, but whatever view we take of these rules, it is obvious that they also govern long-term interests including one’s own.27 Military personnel can do it pursuit of the objectives they are given. Some of these restrictions are fairly detailed and legally codified, for example, those that govern the treatment of prisoners of war. Others are broader and their application to, or implications for, certain specific situations are often contestable, for example, the duty to

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


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 it 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 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 his or her country is fighting in an unjust cause is less certain. His or her duties 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.

For the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, 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.

Roughly speaking, from Moore’s Principia Ethica (1903) to Rawls’s A Theory of Justice (1971), there has been 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—upright conduct, the acceptance of moral responsibility, and 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.