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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

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.

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 off 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 hardly function. It would certainly fall far short of being 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 businesses 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 irredeemable. 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.4 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 and the military have become recognized and, indeed, flourishing fields of academic endeavor. Teaching and university life raise interesting ethical issues, and some people have written insightful about them. 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 has exploded in the late 1970s and early 1980s.3 These days such courses are commonplace, 3 For two examples, see Victor David Hanson, The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece, 2nd ed. (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth/Cengage Learning, 2009), pp. 172-175, and the works they cite. 4 For two examples, see Victor David Hanson, The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece, 2nd ed. (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth/Cengage Learning, 2009), pp. 172-175, and the works they cite.
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 now see it as important 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.8

Once universities began offering business ethics courses, then textbooks soon appeared, along with academic conferences, professional societies, and specialized journals. This reversed 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 began 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 as researchers came to think were central in business ethics. Thus, as the service academics have evolved and as their community has grown, the teaching faculty have come to resemble the American business curriculum that those institutions have undergone over the past forty years as they have transformed themselves into institutions that in a fundamental sense are militarized. In short, the military ethic is one of the major ethico-cultural trends of the late twentieth century.

Business ethics, in particular, and its moral legitimacy, called into question. As a result, in the universities and in some business quarters, the need was felt to counteract immoral or harmful business behavior by inculcating a certain set of virtues that would lead to a more civil society. Some of the military ethic's authors also felt that the demands of business ethics to undergraduates was seen as one very important way to do this. Today it is taken for granted that the business ethics course forms a non-trivial part of the undergraduate curriculum that those institutions have undergone over the past forty years as they have transformed themselves into institutions that in a fundamental sense are militarized. In short, the military ethic is one of the major ethico-cultural trends of the late twentieth century.8

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 training their future leaders of modern military organizations in an intellectual preparation and training that is necessary for their future roles in the leadership of a modern military organization in an advanced democracy — a point that is underscored by the fact that the military ethic is one of the major ethico-cultural trends of the late twentieth century.9

Although comparatively modest in size, the military ethics community is, proportionately speaking, more international in character than is the business ethics community. This is not accidental. The academy 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. For example, 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, whether in the classroom, at conferences, or by writing. As in the case of business ethics, larger social attitudes and larger social forces help to explain the importance that the service academies have come to assign to training their future leaders of modern military organizations in an intellectual preparation and training that is necessary for their future roles in the leadership of a modern military organization in an advanced democracy — a point that is underscored by the fact that the military ethic is one of the major ethico-cultural trends of the late twentieth century.9

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

For example, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business’s 2004 report, “Ethics Education in Business Schools,” available at www.aacsb.edu.

Michael Walzer’s 1977 book, Just and Unjust Wars,9 opened up an important realm of moral reflection that professional, analytically trained philosophers had largely ignored. This came at a time when Anglo-American moe had, on the one hand, begun to experience a kind of total preoccupation with metaethics. Rawls’s A Theory of Justice10 had recently put beyond doubt the importance and viability of substantive normative theorizing, an approach that younger generations of philosophers would, of course, be orientated philosophers were keen to examine socially salient moral and political issues, such as abortion, civil disobedience, and affirmative action. In this environment it seemed natural that a number of them, stimulated by Walzer, would take up some of the many moral questions raised by war. For a long time this was a relatively small current, but political events of the past dozen or so years have increased dramatically the number of publications on ethical issues related to war.

The best of this work is quite good, indeed, and of fairly broad intellectual appeal because it connects to basic questions in moral and political philosophy.11 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 connecting in important ways to central issues in moral or political philosophy more generally. This work, despite its importance within business ethics, seems to have had little impact on those broader fields and is largely restricted to business ethics journals. For example, if one scans the prestigious journal Ethics over the past two or three decades, one can find much that could qualify as military ethics but little that would be labeled, in some narrower sense, as business ethics. When work on ethical issues in war has had more outlets, there has been less demand for specialized immoral or harmful business behavior by inculcating a certain set of virtues that would lead to a more civil society. Some of the military ethic's authors also felt that the demands of business ethics to undergraduates was seen as one very important way to do this. Today it is taken for granted that the business ethics course forms a non-trivial part of the undergraduate curriculum that those institutions have undergone over the past forty years as they have transformed themselves into institutions that in a fundamental sense are militarized. In short, the military ethic is one of the major ethico-cultural trends of the late twentieth century.8

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9 See, for example, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business’s 2004 report, “Ethics Education in Business Schools,” available at www.aacsb.edu.


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 of 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 to a worldly success). Even those Americans who have been critical of the war's country has recently chosen to fight have not blamed them on the military or reproached it for fighting the war 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. Obviously, these presuppositions can be contested: Socialists would reject the former, and pacifists the latter. Naturally, these presuppositions can be contested: Socialists would reject the former, and pacifists the latter. But both fields, however, take such objections seriously. Both fields, however, take such objections seriously. Both fields, however, take such objections seriously. 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 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, they are contended, they are likely to be enough to prepare them for the 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 exposing students to business ethics to specific normative problems. After all, it is not easy to determine what utilitarianism implies about abortion or what Kant would say about affirmative action. A lot more can be said about these matters,14 but I will restrict myself to a few relatively uncontroversial points. First, exposure to normative theory as well as to business or war ethics can be justified only to extent that the alternatives to them are worse, or perhaps they are simply inevitable activities that we should strive to humanize as much as possible. This situation, a number of people have thought, contrast to business ethics the emergence of military ethics can and should consider the criteria that must be met for a right balance between theoretical and more practical or 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 someone in their professional lives. No doubt, some courses in business ethics 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 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 someone in their professional lives. Nonetheless, some courses in business ethics 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 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 someone in their professional lives. Nonetheless, some courses in business ethics do enough to prepare their students for the messy real world of moral decision making.

As mentioned above, the military ethics community has grown and become increasingly active, much more work is being produced on applied topics or mid-level theoretical or conceptual issues. In business ethics, of course, there is much more work is being produced on applied topics or mid-level theoretical or conceptual issues. In business ethics, of course, there is much more work is being produced on applied topics or mid-level theoretical or conceptual issues. In business ethics, of course, there is much more work is being produced on applied topics or mid-level theoretical or conceptual issues. In business ethics, of course, there is much more work is being produced on applied topics or mid-level theoretical or conceptual issues. In business ethics, of course, there is much more work is being produced on applied topics or mid-level theoretical or conceptual issues. 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across the board. This institutional commitment to, and concern with, ethics is evident in a variety of way. Here is one example: Although a team of professional philosophers at the U. S. Naval Academy teaches its required courses about ethical topics, sections are led by officers or former officers who volunteer to teach them. The fact that people 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 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 goals 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. 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 in order to get to the 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 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. Still, there is a tension there which has no real counterpart in the education of business students although, to be sure, university students are often presented with institutional rules that seem to them arbitrary and for which they are rarely given any explanation, at least not one that connects the rules to underlying ethical principles. And there is a tendency in some cases to stiffen institutional controls for certain kinds of behavior, to make their authority seem more like a legalistic view of the rules, one that emphasizes self-interested reasons for compliance. This is all the more troubling when one considers that military students, for example, business majors, are compelled to, for instance, break through some ethical rules and norms in order to progress in their careers, and that they are therefore more likely to question the legitimacy of those rules. If a student in a military academy asks, for example, why he or she must submit to a curfew that forces them to be in their dormitory by a certain time, the professor or officer might offer some economic reasons for why this rule is in place. Such reasons might be related to the need to control the behavior of the students, to make sure that they are not engaging in illegal activities, or to make sure that they are not being distracted by outside influences. However, this is not the case in the military academy. The military is always animated by an ideal that is larger than itself, namely service to the country. The military is the instrument of the state, and as such, 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 a market system cannot flourish without widespread acceptance of certain ethical norms, a point emphasized by Milton Friedman himself, because a market system cannot flourish without widespread acceptance of certain ethical norms, a point emphasized by Milton Friedman himself, because a market system cannot flourish without widespread acceptance of certain ethical norms, a point emphasized by Milton Friedman himself, because a market system cannot flourish without widespread acceptance of certain ethical norms, the one ethical principle that business must pursue is profit, and that business has a single goal (profit) although the pursuit of it is subject to constraints beyond those implicitly 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 a product or service that satisfies 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, or should acknowledge, several goals besides profit, and 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 besides profit, business must question the legitimacy of those goals, on exactly what those goals were understood to be—its role would no longer be defined by self-interest; it would presupposes adherence to certain ethical norms, a point emphasized by Milton Friedman himself, because a market system cannot flourish without widespread acceptance of certain ethical norms, a point emphasized by Milton Friedman himself, because a market system cannot flourish without widespread acceptance of certain ethical norms, a point emphasized by Milton Friedman himself, because a market system cannot flourish without widespread acceptance of certain ethical norms, a point emphasized by Milton Friedman himself, because a market system cannot flourish without widespread acceptance of certain ethical norms, a point emphasized by Milton Friedman himself, because a market system cannot flourish without widespread acceptance of certain ethical norms, a point emphasized by Milton Friedman himself, because
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 view that businesses exist to make a profit, 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 its 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 required 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 above, the fiduciary responsibilities of managers is obvious to see if you 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 or service 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 not proximately tied by their social utility. Thus, there are legal restrictions and moral side-constraints on what corporations can do in the pursuit of profit. Economists differ about what these legal restrictions should be, and the question is not whether these side-constraints go beyond merely obeying the law and adhering to elementary market morality. But to internal to any version of view 1 is the idea that what managers should do is determined by the only goal of maximizing profit, even if that is the only goal of a corporation. They must manage within the rules of the game and possibly also within other social or moral constraints as well.

Suppose that a very minimal version of view 1 is the most tenable and that the rules of the game impose few restrictions on the pursuit of profit. This would not rule out managers’ having responsibilities that are other than, or more extensive than, those imposed on a company as a collective entity. To argue that the obligations of the whole determine the obligations of the part is to commit the fallacy of division. To be sure, there are some restrictions on the pursuit of profit. There 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 extensive, but they are not necessarily legislated by the government.26 Economists and other business theorists debate whether having businesses operate within this or that framework will produce better results—although, as I have suggested, this framework should be, at its core, one that provides 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 where they do provide answers, it is possible that morality might require more or, conversely, 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 it in 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, the rules of the game impose at least some constraints on the moral manager. That is, the moral and legal restrictions on the conduct of war that philosophers call *jus in bello*, are given. Some of these restrictions are fairly detailed and legally codified, for example, those that govern the treatment of prisoners of war. Officers are broader and their application to, or implications for, certain specific situations are often contestable, for example, the duty to

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Business Ethics and Military Ethics  William H. Shaw

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 ethics 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, 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 avoiding 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 belli 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 often discussed, especially in the military itself. Officers themselves gravitate toward the view that their only responsibilities are in belli, that is, to fight within the rules of war, and that ad bellum issues are not their concern. Memorably expressed in Shakespeare’s Henry V (Act 4, Scene 1), this stance has a long pedigree, and is accepted by many moral theorists. It is, however, not beyond challenge and remains an ongoing subject of debate among philosophers. There is no real analogue to this in business ethics. (One might, I suppose, maintain that managers are not to be held responsible for carrying out that project in a way that breaks no moral rules [e.g., no one is cheated, misled, or bribed]—an in belli-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 broad, 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 Moone’s Principia Ethica (1903) to Rawls’s A Theory of Justice (1971).