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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 does not exist, but the question is whether they represent the true, inexorable 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 fairly soon if 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 wrong—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. 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—ruptile, 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, inexorable nature of business.

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 businesses adhere to ethics and the military do not. Is there a difference, then, at the origins of business ethics and military ethics as academic subjects, their institutional contexts, and the nature and purpose of ethics 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 rose sharply in the late 1970s and early 1980s. These days such courses are commonplace, and there are now many universities with intensive programs. Some of these courses are quite demanding, requiring a good deal of reading and writing, and focusing on current issues in ethics, such as business ethics and contemporary moral problems, and the teaching and research undertaken in the field. In contrast, the study of military ethics is much less developed, although there has been significant progress in the past few decades. The number of military ethics courses at military and civilian institutions is still relatively small, and the number of publications in military ethics is also limited. However, there has been a growing interest in the field, and the number of students and researchers engaged in military ethics is increasing.

Some of the reasons for this difference between business ethics and military ethics may lie in the nature of the two fields. Business ethics is an applied field, focused on practical ethical problems faced by businesses and businesspeople. It is concerned with how businesses should act in order to be ethical and how ethics can be integrated into business practices. Military ethics, on the other hand, is a more theoretical field, concerned with the ethical implications of military action and the moral principles that should govern military conduct. It is concerned with questions such as whether war is ever justified, how to justify it, and how to minimize its harm.

In conclusion, while business ethics and military ethics share many similarities, there are also important differences between the two fields. These differences reflect the different nature of the two fields and the different ethical challenges they face. Business ethics is concerned with the ethical problems of business and businesspeople, while military ethics is concerned with the ethical problems of war and the military. However, both fields are important and deserve careful study and analysis.
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 seek 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 revolutionized 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 see as central to their professional conferences, or founding journals for publishing work in business ethics. So business ethics as a specialized academic subject was born, separate from the business curriculum. But whence came the demand for university instruction in business ethics in the first place? In the United States, whence came the demand for university instruction in business ethics? A spin-off of the teaching of business ethics. But does it come first. As this demand grew, and as more and more business schools offered business ethics courses, or putting together a business school curriculum meant including ethics education. And for good reason: if business ethics was a spin-off of the teaching of business ethics, then the teaching of business ethics was the spin-off, with the business curriculum a natural outgrowth. In this environment it was natural to see a number of business schools, stimulated by the need for a research agenda, to develop an interest in teaching business ethics. The case is somewhat different for those who teach ethics-related courses in business schools, as they are more likely to be interested in teaching ethics as a separate subject.

As in the case of business ethics, larger social attitudes, no doubt, help to explain the importance that the service academies give to military ethics, to a lesser extent, to doing research on more specialized or applied topics in military ethics. The military 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 My Lai massacre, which challenged the blithe assumption of many Americans that their country’s wars were always morally justified and its military personnel always upright.

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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 (a state of affairs that contrasts with popular attitudes toward big business and its leaders, which mix distrust and cynicism with admiration or financial 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 war. Obviously, these presuppositions can be contested: Socialists would reject the former, and pacifists the latter. Both fields, however, take such objections seriously. Business ethics may be more abstract or general than most military ethics, which spend some time examining the pros and cons of some wars or what war has been directed to fight. Thus, both military and business ethics will spend some time thinking about abstract or general questions. (In business ethics) whistle-blowing, insider trading, or conflicts of interest or (in military ethics) assassination, collateral damage, or the use of drones. Work at this level is obviously pertinent to thinking about certain real-world decisions, even if it, too, sometimes tends to be more abstract or academic than many students

appreciate the ethical dimension of their lives and the need for critical self-reflection on the choices they make now as well as the choices they will be called upon to make later in their careers. In my experience, business students and war cadets are not necessarily more or less reflective than are their peers elsewhere. They are, perhaps, rather more likely to have imbibed the view that their future professions (business and fighting) make non-reflective people in their businesses. That consideration is triumphing over one’s opponents, and ruthless, dog-eat-dog conduct is the path to glory. But, on balance, their ethical ideas are probably no more naïve than those of end-cyanics of twenty-year-old others.

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. 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 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 manage to do enough to prepare their students for the messy real world of moral decision making. There is in part a tendency for instructors to focus on big, sexy issues at the expense of seemingly more humdrum, nuts and bolts issues, for example, the 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 ethical problems of war and peace are more likely to arise for the 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 face. 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 have thought about 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 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 pedagogical resources available on-line. 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 in ethics 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.

As mentioned before, as the military ethics community has grown and become increasingly active, much more work is being produced on applied topics and mid-level level ethical issues involved in the abstract and highly theoretical work on issues of war that journals like Ethics or Philosophy and Public Affairs tend to publish. In business ethics, of course, there is already a great deal of published work on specific issues and mid-level concepts and theories. Much of this new work in military ethics will probably find its way into the curriculum, if only by influencing the thinking of instructors. For one thing, it will make it easier for instructors to build a course around debates that cadets and midshipmen are likely to find both interesting and pertinent. When one visits a U.S. military academy from another university, one is likely to be surprised by the seriousness with which ethics is taken and the importance assigned to ethical training and the development of moral character 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 one thing, the military is probably somewhat more 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. As mentioned above, this state of affairs contrasts with popular attitudes toward big business and its leaders, which mix distrust and cynicism with admiration or financial 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. 14 For a debate over the usefulness of moral theory for practical ethics, see the articles by C. Haack, “Attitude and Formation of Attitudes toward the U.S. Military,” prepared by David C. King and John Della Volpe of Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government (available on-line). 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.) 16 One such text is Paul Christopher, The Ethics of War and Peace: An Introduction to Legal and Moral Issues, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2003). 17 For example, Brian Orend, The Morality of War (Peterbor- ough, Ont.: Broadview, 2006). 18 Gregory M. Reicher, Henk Syse, and Endre Ebye, eds., The Ethics of War: Classic and Contemporary Readings (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989). 19 Steve Hall, 2005). The Ethics of War: Classic and Contemporary Readings (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2005).
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 philosophy course primarily to business students, faculty from philosophy departments are often invited to teach supplementary sections, which 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 discussing ethical questions is itself a powerful motivator.\(^*\)

In the military academies, there is also a tension between the extremely rule-bound institutional regime to which cadets and midshipmen must submit, which has the goal of inculcating in them an ethic of automatic adherence to orders, and the philosopher’s goal of encouraging students to question and to think for themselves. This is not to say that this tension is insurmountable, such as 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 act autonomously, or fully autonomously, in pursuing these objectives. These general points apply equally 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 people need and want. However, on the most prevalent view these days, which I have intimated, the law and the elementary norms of business practice are the ultimate reason for business behavior: a business must pursue self-interests that are consistent with the law and customary business morality. Restricting business to what is laid down by law and customary business morality is the only way to ensure that businesses do not violate social norms. To put the matter more simply, business behavior is constrained by rules and regulations and what those rules and regulations should be.

The thesis that businesses have responsibilities beyond attempting to maximize profit rests on two foundational premises. The first is that businesses have, or should acknowledge additional side-constraints on business activity, that is, restrictions on the pursuit of profit beyond those already laid down by law and customary business morality. The second is that business has, and should acknowledge the responsibility to itself, to serve its own interests in satisfying the interests of its customers. On the other hand, businesses are driven by self-interests that are consistent with the law and customary business morality.

Although people sometimes say that the job of the military is “to kill people and break things,” this is a misconceived understanding of how the military actually operates. The military is concerned with, 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 philosophy course primarily to business students, faculty from philosophy departments are often invited to teach supplementary sections, which 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 discussing ethical questions is itself a powerful motivator.\(^*\)

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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 goal.25 In response to Milton Friedman, in the book 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 good goal. 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 above, the military has one defining organizational goal (service to the country), and its ability to employ force is merely a means to that end. Certainly if one embraces view 3 and probably also if one embraces view 2, then a business should do the same. As I argued above, the military is akin to the military in being a kind of 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 constrained by its 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 those legal restrictions should be, and a host of philosophers and rule-givers differ about whether those side-constraints go beyond merely obeying the law and adhering to elementary market morality. But internal to any version of view 1 is the idea that what managers should do is merely to 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 (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. 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 elementary market morality, of the company they serve. Moreover, managers have a service component to their organization and to cooperate actively and constructively in achieving its legitimate ends. The analogy with the fiduciary responsibilities of managers is therefore obvious: although (1) the stakes can be considerably higher here than in business and (2) the organization that officers serve itself premised on service and not, as view 1 would have it, on self-interest, managers are autonomous agents, and their roles are autonomous moral agents. Just as the rules of the game or their own sense of responsibility constrains the pursuit of profit by managers, so the rules of war, that is, the moral and legal restrictions on the conduct of war that philosophers call jus in bello, constrain what military personnel can do in pursuit of the objectivities 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 not equally constraining by their social utility. Thus, economists and other business theorists debate whether having businesses operate within this or that framework will produce better results—although, as I have suggested, some have been more settled than others. Even on the least restrictive version of view 1, a business is not profit, but the provision of some good or service.


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 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 bello responsibilities. But what an officer is to do if he or she suspects, believes, or knows that his or her country is fighting an unjust cause is less often discussed, especially in the military itself. Officers themselves gravitate toward the view that their only responsibilities are in bello, 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 whether the corporate project in which they participate is immoral [for example, providing software to be used for a vicious end by a despicable regime]—an ad bellum-like question—but are nevertheless 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 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 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.