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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 worthwhile to consider whether 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, irresponsible nature of business.

The problem with thinking that they do, with thinking that business is at its core a totally amoral activity, is that this view ignores the extent to which business activity presupposes adherence to certain elementary moral standards. Without widespread, if perhaps unconscious, compliance with certain norms, without some degree of trust, business could barely function. It would certainly fail if it were very inefficient 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 of most people today condemning many, perhaps most, cultural and moral restrictions on their conduct: Certain weapons, certain weapons 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 terroristic 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 moral 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 such important matters. 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 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 exploded in the late 1970s and early 1980s.6 These days such courses are commonplace,

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1. On managerial versus engineering ethics, see Charles E. Harris, Jr., Michael S. Politch, and Michael J. Rabins, Engineering Ethics: Cases and Concepts, 4th ed. (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth/Cengage Learning, 2009), pp. 172-175, and the works they cite.

2. The reflections that follow were stimulated by an academic year that I, a long-time teacher of business ethics, recently spent at the U.S. Naval Academy. I thank the Academy’s Vice Admiral James B. Stockdale Center for Ethical Leadership for its financial support and my colleagues at the Center for many valuable and stimulating conversations.


4. For two examples, see Victor David Hanson, The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece, 2nd ed. (Berkley: University of California Press, 2009), and David Wetheam, 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 and business can and does play an important role in the ethical education of business students and professionals. But the connection is not as straightforward as it might appear. 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 terroristic 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 aspire 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 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 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 saw as the most compelling. In some cases, academic conferences, or founding journals for publishing work in business ethics. So business ethics as a specialized academic subject was born. In other words, business ethics had its own journal.

The same was true of academic journals, the journal Business Ethics. For example, if one scans the prestigious journals in business ethics, it seems to have had little impact on those broader fields that goes well beyond questions of war. By contrast, this demand was so great that there came up the need for more business ethics, and a relatively small number of people, including Robert Guest, who edited the journal Business Ethics, were able to meet this demand. They did so, and the journal has grown in size, scope, and readership over the past forty years as they have transformed themselves from a small, obscure journal into one of the leading journals in the field. Business Ethics is now a widely respected journal in the academic world of business ethics.

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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 the past forty years as they have transformed themselves from a small, obscure journal into one of the leading journals in the field. Business Ethics is now a widely respected journal in the academic world of business ethics.

As in the case of business ethics, a large number of philosophers have also been engaged in the study of military ethics. The military, as an institution, is sensitive and responsive to the social and political trends that shape the society in which it operates. And it is certainly true that the service academies have an enhanced concern with ethics followed in the wake of the Vietnam war and events such as the massacre at My Lai, which complicated the blithe assumption of many Americans that their country’s wars were always morally justified and its military personnel always upright.

In particular, the International Society for Military Ethics. 

Michael Walzer’s 1977 book, Just and Unjust Wars, opened up an important realm of moral reflection that professional, analytically trained philosophers had largely ignored. This came at a time when Anglo-American moral philosophy had become primarily concerned with ethical theory and had 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 a new generation of philosophers oriented themselves towards the study of moral and political issues, such as, civil disobedience, and affirmative action. In this environment it was natural that a number of people, stimulated by Walzer, would take up some of the 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.

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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 institution11 (a state of affairs that contrasts with popular attitudes toward big business and its leaders, which mix distrust and cynicism with admiration or, if not to say with 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. Business ethics and war ethics, as the current and former military leaders are also likely to run into. Still, both business and military ethics may better in those roles if they have spent some time thinking about certain theoretical matters and somewhat abstract or general questions. Finally, there is the fact that things to which these particular students are likely to run into are worthwhile for its own sake, but this is obviously a value judgment, not an empirical claim.

If even, as I believe, various theoretical issues and broad questions about war or capitalism all have a role 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 both fields will 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 hum drum nuts and bolts issues, for example, concerning 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 one is presumably addressing 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 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 military leaders to think about what 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 on the internet. 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 courses 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 ethics15 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.16 There are also some large, historically oriented anthologies on the ethics of war.17 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 or war.

As mentioned before, as the military ethics community has grown and become increasingly active, much more work is being produced on applied issues and mid-level theoretical issues. For example, there is a certain amount of 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 classroom, if only as a result of the influence 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.14

14 For a debate over the usefulness of moral theory for practical ethics, see the articles in C. Harris, ed., Teaching Ethics, vol. 10, no. 1 (Fall 2009) and by Bernard Gert, C. E. Harris, and Michael Davis in Teaching Ethics, vol. 12, no. 1 (Fall 2011).

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 (Peterbourough, 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, debates over curriculum sections are led by officers or former officers who volunteer to teach them. The fact that people respect, who have often fought 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 advocating 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. 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. As they see it, the true test of commitment lies in the substance of what taught, not just in who teaches it.

I do not, however, want to paint too rosy a picture of ethics instruction at the military academies. It involves many of the same challenges that teachers of philosophy encounter elsewhere. Furthermore, some report that in practice Socratic dialogue and open, classroom discussion of challenging ethical issues tend to give way to the search for pre-approved answers. 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 treat institutional contexts for training officers to talk in terms of a legalistic view of the rules, one that emphasizes self-interested reasons for compliance.

Moreover, although this pedagogical move to (1) the nature and purpose of business and (2) the moral responsibilities of managers, on the one hand, and, officers, on the other. These topics involve issues that are central to business and to military ethics. Analyzing them in comparative perspective should throw some fresh light on both fields.

Business, the Military, and Service to Society

Although people sometimes say that the job of the military is “to kill people and break things,” this vulgates military service and obscures a larger truth about it. It vulgarizes it at the micro level because much of what people do in the military has little or nothing to do with killing and breaking. For their part, philosophers and other academics (often, these days, in leadership positions). They are, of course, equally concerned about the messages implicit in the curriculum they teach. For example, providing certain goods or services or earning a profit as best they can. The second is that business has, or should acknowledge, responsibilities to employees, to the environment, and to the larger society — beyond what society needs, and in this way it serves the country.

The thesis that businesses have responsibilities beyond attempting to maximize profit within the existing framework of law, regulation, and accepted business practices can only be understood in the context of a larger framework. The first is that we have put these other responsibilities in additional side-constraints on business activity, that is, additional restrictions on the pursuit of profit beyond those already laid down by law and customary business morality. The second is that business has, or should acknowledge itself as having, other goals besides the pursuit of profit, for example, providing service to society.

The market system cannot flourish without widespread acceptance of certain elementary norms or moral rules, such as honesty and good faith. Does business have social or moral responsibilities above and beyond the pursuit of profit? Can the rules of the market, as we thus understood? The answer to this question is hotly contested, and debate over it is likely to loom large in any class on business ethics. As I have intimated, economists are likely to believe that the trick is to get the right laws and regulations and then to turn business loose. Some business theorists and probably most of those who teach business ethics believe, to the contrary, that businesses do have such responsibilities — responsibilities to employees, to suppliers and other business partners, to consumers, to the environment, and to the larger society — beyond what the law and the elementary norms of business practice require. The practical implications of the two views often coincide. That’s because those who believe that business has broad social or moral responsibilities also argue that companies who embrace those responsibilities tend to be more profitable than companies that do not whereas those who deny that companies have those responsibilities in the first place acknowledge that it may be in their interest to do so.

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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. Further, the whole enterprise 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 its raison d’être for existing in the first place.

To summarize the discussion schematically, if $A = \text{producing some socially useful good or service, and} B = \text{making a profit},$ 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 proper role and responsibilities of an organization that serve is itself premised on service and not, as view 1 might suggest, having goals other than or in addition to maximizing business enterprise 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 precluded 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 the proper set of rules and rules-constraints go beyond 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 not determined by the simple goal of maximizing profit, even if that is the only goal of a corporation. They must manage within the constraints 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 situations in which managers must help the company make money, and they do indeed have a fiduciary duty to its interests and, in particular, to enrich themselves if it serves one or other side of a conflict of interest. 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 something that we can derive directly from the goals, even as constrained by law and by elementary market morality, of the company or organization to which they are beholden as agents.

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, officers 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 objectives they are given. Some of these restrictions are fairly detailed and legally codified, for example, that the government give 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 well rehearsed 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, many of the rules we accept are designed to provide 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 whatever rules one does provide, it is possible that morality might require more or, conversely, less, than the rules of war. The rules themselves, on one plausible view, are analogous to those that govern business in being norms or conventions that states have found in them 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, we would like to think that they are well aware of the possibility of being called upon to sacrifice themselves for their country or for their comrades. For them to risk their lives, say, to safeguard noncombatants requiring them to put their own self-interest aside, to selflessness, but selflessness is something that their profession already demands. The virtues associated with being a warrior have varied across time and cultures, but in the western tradition the warrior ideal is that of a bloodthirsty killer who seeks to preserve his own life at all costs. Whatever else a soldier is, he is not the rational, self-interested, maximizing agent hypothesized by economic theory and explicitly targeted for business theorists.

The military ideal of sacrifice finds no obvious counterpart in the world of business, nor do at least three other aspects of the responsibilities of officers. First, officers are responsible not only for the conduct of their subordinates but also for their moral development. They must try to protect the young people in their command


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, rather than to ensure the safety 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 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 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, thank conference participants for their helpful comments.

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.