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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 barely function. It would certainly fail if badly inefficient or ineffective at providing society with the goods and services it needs or wants. Indeed, without some sense of ethics, business would descend into gangsterism. Those businessespeople 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 prospects or performance, maintains that violations of the law, or engages in rapacious acquisition 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 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 both. 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 increased in the late 1970s and early 1980s. These days such courses are commonplace, 1

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

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


4. For two examples, see Victor David Hanson, The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece, 2nd ed. (Berkley: University of California Press, 2009), and David Wetham, Just Wars and Moral Victories: Surprise, Deception, and the Normative Framework of European War in the Later Middle Ages (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009).


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 seem 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 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 were teaching. Their work was rarely presented at conferences, or founding journals for publishing work in business ethics. So business ethics as a specialized academic subject was institutionalized as journals of business ethics. That whence came the demand for university instruction in business ethics in the first place? In the United States, that demand emerged during a period of political and business scandal — think of Watergate or the revelations of overseas bribery by American firms — and of widespread disillusionment with the nation’s political and business elite. The image of big business, in particular, and its moral legitimacy, was 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 code of business ethics. The demand has also been less because far fewer people teach military ethics and because most of those who do teach the subject do so at military academies, where the imperative to tell their students what to do makes military ethics more relevant. Still, as the service academies have been hiring civilian philosophers or training military officers to teach ethics and, in particular, military ethics, a small but vigorous philosophical community has emerged, complete with its own professional organizations11 and conferences and its own journal, the Journal of Military Ethics, now ten years old. This, in turn, has increased the production of research on more specialized or applied topics in military ethics. Because work on ethical issues in war has had more impact on the service academies’ plans to graduate students for military service, the leading work in business ethics, for example, on the use of drones, on aspects of command responsibility, or on the subordination of the military to civilian leadership — research that is often carried out at a lower level of abstraction than one finds in military ethics. Although comparatively modest in size, the military ethics community is, proportionally speaking, more international in character than is the business ethics community. The subject matter of military ethics teaching at American military academies and their counterparts in other western counties. Unsurprisingly, both the military ethics and the business ethics communities have links with practitioners in their fields, that is, with business people and military personnel. That this should be so is obvious for those teaching in military academies. By contrast, in my experience, philosophers who teach business ethics or even write on topics in business ethics seldom have much business experience or much contact with business leaders. However, many non-philosophers working in business schools also teach business ethics, and their literature is often read by business people. As a result, the military ethics communities are more likely to find much that could qualify as military ethics but little that could be labeled business ethics.

In the case of 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 could be labeled business ethics. Because 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 code of business ethics. The demand has also been less because far fewer people teach military ethics and because most of those who do teach the subject do so at military academies, where the imperative to tell their students what to do makes military ethics more relevant. Still, as the service academies have been hiring civilian philosophers or training military officers to teach ethics and, in particular, military ethics, a small but vigorous philosophical community has emerged, complete with its own professional organizations11 and conferences and its own journal, the Journal of Military Ethics, now ten years old. This, in turn, has increased the production of research on more specialized or applied topics in military ethics. Because work on ethical issues in war has had more impact on the service academies’ plans to graduate students for military service, the leading work in business ethics, for example, on the use of drones, on aspects of command responsibility, or on the subordination of the military to civilian leadership — research that is often carried out at a lower level of abstraction than one finds in military ethics. Although comparatively modest in size, the military ethics community is, proportionally speaking, more international in character than is the business ethics community. The subject matter of military ethics teaching at American military academies and their counterparts in other western counties. Unsurprisingly, both the military ethics and the business ethics communities have links with practitioners in their fields, that is, with business people and military personnel. That this should be so is obvious for those teaching in military academies. By contrast, in my experience, philosophers who teach business ethics or even write on topics in business ethics seldom have much business experience or much contact with business leaders. However, many non-philosophers working in business schools also teach business ethics, and their literature is often read by business people. As a result, the military ethics communities are more likely to find much that could qualify as military ethics but little that could be labeled business ethics.

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

11 In particular, the International Society for Military Ethics.

12 It is true, too, as an anonymous reviewer has pointed out, that military personnel are involved in a steady stream of criminality, without, apparently, disturbing their sense of duty and honor (consider German military officers during World War II).
in their conduct. Nevertheless, I tend to think that in contrast to business ethics the emergence of military ethics as a discipline, as a subfield of teaching and philosophical research, reflected developments that were to a significant extent organic or internal to changing ideas of military education and less a response to, or a reflection of, a perceived social need on the part of the public for more moral behavior by members of the military forces. Although the Vietnam war tarnished the U. S. military, today it is a highly respected institution\(^\text{13}\) (a state of affairs that contrasts with popular attitudes toward big business and its leaders, which mix distrust and cynicism with admiration or worldly success). Even those Americans who have been critical of the wars their country has recently chosen to fight have not blamed them on the military or reproached it for fighting the wars it has been directed to fight.

### Some Pedagogical Issues in the Two Fields

Business ethics presupposes something like the moral legitimacy or potential legitimacy of capitalism whereas military ethics assumes something like the moral legitimacy or potential legitimacy of some wars. Obviously, these presuppositions can be contested: Socialists would reject the former, and pacifists the latter. Both fields, however, take such objections seriously. Business ethics, for example, says that even if business and war are capitalist or militaristic, or even if their activities are morally suspect, such as medical ethics, where almost no one thinks the situation contrasts with other areas of applied philosophy, should strive to humanize as much as possible. This or perhaps they are simply inevitable activities that we only to extent that the alternatives to them are worse, either activity. Perhaps business or war can be justified in fact ever met. In both cases, a student might be left ethics will consider the criteria that must be met for a moral legitimacy or potential legitimacy of some wars it has been directed to fight.

Some Pedagogical Issues in the Two Fields

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Business ethics often struggle to get undergraduates to 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 young people are more likely to have this gut feeling about the choices they will make in their professional lives. No doubt, some courses in business ethics can and should encompass more than the moral aspects of 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,\(^\text{14}\) but I will restrict myself to a few relatively uncontroversial points.

First, exposure to normative theory as well as to basic ideas about business ethics 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 is, of course, the case with medical ethics, such as medical ethics, where almost no one thinks the underlying activity is morally suspect.

Teachers of ethics often struggle to get undergraduates to overcome their sophomoric relativism and appreciate that not all ethical stances are equally defensible. We want our students to take ethics seriously, that is, to consider them seriously. We want them to question their own principles and values and those of the society around them. Ideally, it can encourage them to rely less on their gut feelings and more on their intellect. For this reason, teaching business ethics or war ethics may do better in those roles if they have spent some time thinking about certain theoretical matters and somewhat abstract or general questions.\(^\text{15}\) Finally, there is the practical matter that things to which we are accustomed are worthwhile for its own sake, but this is obviously a value judgment, not an empirical claim.

Even if, 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 business ethics are likely to focus on big, sexy issues at the expense of seemingly more humdrum nuts and bolts issues, such as 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 the senior and middle-level executive ranks of business and military may do better in those roles if they have spent somewhat more time on philosophical matters.

### Pedagogical Materials

Finally, there is the practical matter that things to which we are accustomed are worthwhile for its own sake, but this is obviously a value judgment, not an empirical claim.

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13 Today the public has higher confidence in the military than in Congress, the press, the clergy, or colleges and universities, and young people are more likely to trust it to do the right thing than they are the Supreme Court, the president, Congress, the United Nations, the federal government, or the media. These are topics of ongoing concern to military philosophers, such as military ethics, which was included in the 2007 presentation "Attitudes and Formation of Attitudes toward the U.S. Military," prepared by David C. King and John Della Villa of Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government (available on-line).

14 For a debate over the usefulness of moral theory for practical ethics, see the articles by C. E. Harris and Michael Davis in Teaching Ethics, vol. 12, no. 1 (Fall 2011). For an example of a debate over the usefulness of non-moral theory for practical ethics, see the articles by C. E. Harris and Michael Davis in 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.)
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 social issues and political questions, discussion 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 military ethic 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. 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 met in order to graduate, as something that lies at the core of their future profession. I do not, however, want to paint too rosy a picture of the ethical instruction at the military academies. It involves many of the same challenges that teachers of philosophy encounter elsewhere. Furthermore, some report that in practice Socratic dialogue and open, classroom discussion of challenging ethical issues tend to give way to the search for pre-approved answers. But even if this is or has been a problem, the situation will certainly continue to improve as the military academies emphasize the value of ethical discourse. Midshipmen and officers, on the other. These topics involve issues that are central to business ethics and to military ethics. Analyzing them in comparative perspective should throw some fresh light on both fields.

**Business, the Military, and Service to Society**

Although people sometimes say that the job of the military is to “kill people and break things,” this vulgarity is a misapprehension of the nature and purpose of business and the military. It is certainly true that midshipmen must think for themselves about ethical matters (and to learn to identify those situations) while at the same time seeing the importance of their having been trained to follow orders. 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 the military to institutionalize the legalistic view of the rules, one that emphasizes self-interest reasons for compliance. Over time, the gap between these two perspectives and the challenges that teachers of philosophy encounter elsewhere. Furthermore, some report that in practice Socratic dialogue and open, classroom discussion of challenging ethical issues tend to give way to the search for pre-approved answers. But even if this is or has been a problem, the situation will certainly continue to improve as the military academies emphasize the value of ethical discourse. Midshipmen and officers, on the other. These topics involve issues that are central to business ethics and to military ethics. Analyzing them in comparative perspective should throw some fresh light on both fields.

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19 Princeton University appears to be one. And at many universities, ethics courses, even if not required, often satisfy university-wide general education requirements.


21 I should state, for what it is worth, that it does not correspond to my experience at the U. S. Naval Academy.

22 Miller, “Squaring the Circle”, 214.


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, who claims that Whole Foods is simply maximizing its profits through providing consumers with a service value, Mackey insists that his company does not treat customer satisfaction as a means to an end, rather, it is the whole point of his business, the reason for it existence. Profitability is a side effect of pursuing that goal well. At the same time, profitability is a necessary means of continuing to pursue it effectively because a company that fails to make money will not be able to go on providing the goods and services that are its raison d’être for existing in the first place.

To summarize the discussion schematically, if A = producing socially useful goods and 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 proper role and responsibilities of managers is obvious: 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 philosophers 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 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, we should recognize that it is one or other side that 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 something that we can derive directly from the goals, even as constrained by law and by elementary market morality, of the company of which they are members, regardless of the 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 organization 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 only to its social good. There are, of course, other important social responsibilities. For example, some large corporations have ethics training programs, but — judged by the sorts of programs that filter down to the university — one suspects that they are regulatory and compliance oriented. Moreover, some business or military situations will produce better results — although, as I have suggested, even the best set of laws and rules may fail 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 when they do not, officers do not have the luxury of following a fiduciary duty always takes priority over other 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, restrictions on the 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 something that we can derive directly from the goals, even as constrained by law and by elementary market morality, of the company of which they are members, regardless of the 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 organization 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.


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, 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.

Finally, everyone acknowledges that officers have serious in bellow 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 responsibility is in bellow, that is, to fight within the law, 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. 29 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 in bellow-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. 30 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 Moore’s Principia Ethica (1903) to Rawls’s A Theory of Justice (1971).

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