

**Symposium: Stephen Kershner's *Gratitude toward Veterans***

A Case for Gratitude:  
A Response to Stephen Kershner's *Gratitude toward Veterans*

Michael Robillard  
University of Oxford

**1. Introduction**

In *Gratitude toward Veterans: Why Americans Should Not Be Very Grateful Toward Veterans*,<sup>1</sup> Stephen Kershner serves as a much-needed philosophical gadfly, challenging received views on an issue too frequently taken for granted by academics and non-academics alike. Indeed, when it comes to the issue of what society owes military veterans, we find too often within mainstream discourse an assumed debt to veterans coupled with the prevalence of two dominant, unquestioned narratives of “veteran as hero” or “veteran as victim.” Such knee-jerk lionization or pitying of veterans can frequently stymie more nuanced discussions concerning the normative foundations of our presupposed debts to veterans as well as the ethics of particular wars with which the concept of veteran gets too frequently conflated.<sup>2</sup> Kershner's polemical work therefore functions to question many of these assumptions and forces the reader to consider seriously, perhaps for the first time, the normative underpinnings of the duty of gratitude citizens are supposed to have toward veterans. While I do not agree with Kershner's overall conclusions, I sympathize with the general

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Kershner, *Gratitude toward Veterans: Why Americans Should Not Be Very Grateful to Veterans* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014). All references hereafter are in parenthetical citation in the text.

<sup>2</sup> For further criticism of this trend, see Jeff McMahan, “Supporting Our Troops?” at *Left2Right*, December 6, 2004, accessed online at: [http://left2right.typepad.com/main/2004/12/supporting\\_our\\_.html](http://left2right.typepad.com/main/2004/12/supporting_our_.html).

spirit of inquiry from which his argument flows and believe it to be a valuable and necessary contribution to the ongoing civilian-military dialogue.

In Section 2, I provide a brief summary of Kershner's two main theses and the sub-arguments he employs to motivate them. In Section 3, I unpack some of Kershner's major sub-arguments and offer a response to each. I conclude in Section 4 by considering to what extent Kershner's arguments apply to veterans specifically.

## 2. Kershner's Argument

Kershner advances two main theses:

*Gratitude for the Past:* In the United States, citizens should not be very grateful to veterans.

*Gratitude for the Future:* In the future, United States citizens should avoid being grateful to veterans.

In defending these two theses, Kershner explicitly or tacitly relies upon the truth of the following claims:

- (1) Gratitude is a duty.
- (2) Gratitude is a *directed* duty.
- (3) *Groups* are apt conferrers and apt bearers of (aggregated) gratitude.
- (4) The specific group of U.S. veterans, both past and future, does not satisfy the necessary and sufficient conditions for being the proper bearers of gratitude from U.S. citizens. These conditions include (p. xiv):

*Motivation:* The benefactor's primary motivation was to provide benefit.

*Trying:* The benefactor tried to provide a significant benefit.

*Epistemic Condition:* The benefactor's effort was reasonable, that is, it rested on adequate evidence.

Kershner therefore concludes:

(5) US citizens do not have a positive duty of gratitude toward past and future U.S. veterans.

For the sake of brevity, I will not comment on all of Kershnar's claims and sub-arguments. Instead, I will focus mainly on only those which I find most philosophically interesting or controversial.

### **3. Response**

#### ***a. Gratitude as a directed duty***

I would like to begin my response by questioning the coherence of one of the major claims upon which Kershnar's overall project rests, namely, the idea that persons can have duties of gratitude at all. As he notes (pp. 16-18), one common challenge that his argument faces is that we do not have a duty to express gratitude since others do not have a correlative claim-right to such an expression. Kershnar replies to this challenge as follows:

A claim-right is present in the gratitude-debtor if the following is true. First, one person acts wrongly only if she wrongs someone. Second, one person wrongs someone only if she fails to satisfy a duty owed to another. Third, if one person owes a duty to a second, then the second has a claim-right against the first. (p. 17)

I believe this might be too quick. Particularly, I believe that it is plausible that the first premise in the quotation is false; one can act wrongly without necessarily wronging any particular person. For instance, one way someone might act wrongly without wronging anyone is to act without proper regard for important moral (and epistemic) *reasons*. Put another way, this is to say that the moral universe extends beyond just the familiar Hohfeldian framework of correlative duties and claim-rights.<sup>3</sup> With regard to gratitude, one alternative account might be to hold that there are good moral reasons to be grateful to certain persons but that these reasons do not rise to the level of duties such that those persons would then have claim-rights against us to fulfill such duties or that third-parties could justifiably enforce such duties. What's more, when it comes to the area of

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<sup>3</sup> Wesley Newcomb Hohfeld, "Fundamental Legal Conceptions as Applied in Judicial Reasoning," *Yale Law Journal* 26, no. 8 (June 1917), pp. 710-70.

population ethics, many philosophers explain the wrongness of certain Parfitian non-identity cases<sup>4</sup> by invoking a notion of moral reasons that are impersonal in nature and lack any specific target of wrongdoing. For what it's worth, I myself am agnostic as to whether or not gratitude should count as a directed duty thereby generating a correlative claim-right or whether it is a moral reason short of being a duty. For the sake of argument, I will grant to Kershnar that we can talk coherently about "duties of gratitude," but I believe that it is at least worth flagging that his argument rests on this controversial premise which is not settled and probably warrants greater defending.<sup>5</sup>

***b. Motivations***

Kershnar argues, for several reasons, that it is false that all veterans *equally* warrant significant gratitude. For one, it is fair to say that of the total set of motivations to join the military, the average veteran's motivations are, at best, mixed. They are mixed insofar as persons who typically join the military are likely motivated by a variety of altruistic as well as self-interested motives. These motives can range from a robust sense of patriotism and civic duty to a desire for educational and economic benefits, finding a sense of meaning and purpose, achieving social esteem, vindicating a traditional masculine identity, wanting to test one's mettle, or satisfying a primal desire for risk and violence.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, Kershnar argues that it is false that every veteran's primary motive for joining the military is to benefit American citizens. Given that many if not most veterans are not primarily motivated to join the military on account of wholly selfless, altruistic motives, Kershnar concludes that they do not warrant gratitude from U.S. citizens.

It is not clear to me that a benefactor always needs to be motivated primarily by concern for a beneficiary in order for that

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<sup>4</sup> Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

<sup>5</sup> I thank Lars Christie for this insight about gratitude being a reason and not a duty. See also Thomas Sinclair, "The Claimability of Directed Duties," Oxford Moral Philosophy Lecture Series, January 2017.

<sup>6</sup> This list of veterans' possible motivations is a combination of what Kershnar explicitly states and what I have personally added.

beneficiary to owe him or her a debt of gratitude. Consider the following case:

*Daredevil*

I am on a sinking raft and cannot swim. As I am about to drown, a thrill-seeking daredevil, motivated purely by the adrenaline rush, swings in on a rope and saves me from certain demise.

In such a case, even if I knew that the daredevil's motivations were purely self-interested, it seems to me that I would still be obligated at least to say "Thank you" to him. This would seem even more appropriate if the daredevil had other, less morally praiseworthy options to choose from in order to satisfy his adrenaline fix but chose to save my life nonetheless. In the case of veterans, the average veteran's motivations are likely not nearly as close to the purely self-interested motivations of the daredevil, but are, in fact, likely a mixture of altruistic and egoistic motivations as Kershnar suggests. If it seems at all plausible that I could owe a "Thank you" to the purely self-interested daredevil, then it therefore seems to me even more plausible that I could owe a similar sentiment of gratitude to the veteran who ostensibly acted from a set of motives that were mixed. Something similar might also be said with regard to mothers. We have a notion of what constitutes a good, selfless mother, but do I no longer owe my mother any gratitude if she is or was motivated by a positive sense of personal identity associated with being a good mother? Despite our intuitions about such a case, Kershnar's view makes it difficult to see how such a debt of gratitude would obtain.

*c. Efficacy, sacrifice, and risk*

In addition to motivations, Kershnar also points out that even if a primary motive of veterans was to benefit civilians, it is nonetheless false that all veterans equally benefit civilians to a significant degree. Indeed, many veterans' causal contributions to overall civilian benefit are minimally efficacious at best. The benefit they provide to society at large is often equaled or surpassed by the contributions of other groups within society, such as farmers, sanitation workers, intellectuals, etc., which are groups we typically don't think warrant any special debt of gratitude.

One common reply to this point, which Kershnar readily anticipates and responds to, is that what makes veterans special in

terms of warranting a debt of gratitude from society at large is the unique degree of physical sacrifice and *physical* risk that accompanies the military profession. Much like in the case of efficacy, Kershnar points out that all soldiers do not in fact always place themselves in situations of high physical risk, and that the undertaking of such risk can adequately be captured by a notion of *contractual* risk. Kershnar further notes that it is not at all clear that the physically risky acts that certain soldiers perform are all that causally efficacious in benefitting the average U.S. citizen when compared to the overall benefits provided by groups like intellectuals and farmers.

In responding to Kershnar on this particular point, I'm not sure if we should readily accept the presumed binary between gratitude toward veterans and gratitude toward civilians that he sets up. The empirical fact that farmers, sanitation workers, and intellectuals are often under-appreciated in society does not entail that we ought not appreciate them or that we ought not appreciate veterans either. It might be the case that we ought to be grateful to veterans (for their particular risks, sacrifices, etc.) *and* we ought to be grateful to certain civilian groups (for their particular risks, sacrifices, etc.)—and that society as a whole is just failing at both of these duties. Hence, gratitude needn't be zero-sum in the way Kershnar seems to presuppose.

What's more, I think it is at least an open question as to whether or not the kinds of risks and sacrifices undertaken by soldiers are in fact comparable to those undertaken by certain civilian groups and whether or not such sacrifices and risks are more or less causally efficacious in bringing about some important social good that couldn't be achieved otherwise. Engagement of such considerations quickly takes us down a path toward a more general debate regarding issues of commensurability and parity, a debate that is well beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that the physical risks and sacrifices endemic to combat, as well as the specific benefits they achieve, might not be as comparable or reducible to those found in the civilian sphere as Kershnar assumes.

For the sake of argument, however, even if we grant that a given soldier's risk-taking acts are wholly inefficacious in bringing about the social good of national defense (or some other worthy cause), I nonetheless argue that, *ceteris paribus*, such a soldier would still warrant some form of gratitude on the part of U.S. citizens. Take, for example, a case where I am playing with my exceptionally well-trained German Shepherd and an unwitting bystander, mistakenly believing

that I am about to be mauled, leaps in between me and the dog, fully believing that she is putting herself in harm's way in order to save my life. Even though I know full well that I am in no physical danger whatsoever and even though I know that her attempt to save me is wholly inefficacious, it still seems to me that I am at least obligated to thank her, if only for the well-intentioned attempt. Where the analogy breaks down, of course, is in those cases where a soldier's actions are not merely inefficacious and morally neutral but in fact contributing to the prosecution of an unjust war or an unjust act in war. These are, however, contingent and not necessary features of being a veteran, and therefore not ones which we should assume always obtain for all U.S. veterans. If, however, the veteran has taken part in a war that has satisfied all *ad bellum* criteria for justness and she has conducted herself justly and honorably in battle, then even if the soldier puts herself at risk inefficaciously or at no risk at all, I argue that such an attempt still warrants gratitude on the part of U.S. citizens, however ineffective and unnecessary the attempt might be.<sup>7</sup>

What's more, even if a soldier is never at any physical risk and never believes herself to be at physical risk at all, there is at least still something to be said for the voluntary act of raising one's right hand and consenting to the *possibility* of one day being placed in such risky situations if the state deems that necessary.<sup>8</sup> That someone was at least willing to try "to pull his or her own weight" (and pull much more than his or her own weight by consenting *possibly* to make the ultimate sacrifice) seems to me to be a morally significant act of no short order, one which warrants recognition even if such an opportunity never presents itself. That one was willing to subject oneself to the moral luck of war and the decision-making of the state (at least partially on account of an altruistic motivation) seems to warrant some form of gratitude, especially when compared to the overwhelming majority of

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<sup>7</sup> As Saba Bazargan points out, the soldier who is wholly causally inefficacious is at the very least, in principle, signing on potentially to be a "willing human shield"; see Saba Bazargan, "Killing Minimally Responsible Threats," *Ethics* 125, no. 1 (October 2014), pp. 114-36.

<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that Kershnar spends a lengthy chapter discussing the issue of draftee veterans and why draftee veterans also do not warrant gratitude from the American public. For the sake of brevity, I will restrict my inquiry here to volunteer soldiers.

the rest of the American population who consciously chose to avoid (even potentially) being placed in such contexts.

Additionally, I do not think that Kershnar properly recognizes the full spectrum of risks soldiers may undertake while in uniform. In addition to the many *physical* risks soldiers may be exposed to, there are a great number of *moral* risks that soldiers may be exposed to as well. Moral risks are often much greater in complexity and severity than anything readily recognizable within civilian society. In other words, when a soldier enters the military profession he not only agrees possibly to expose himself to scenarios that are potentially physically risky, but he also agrees potentially to place himself in some of the most morally risky decision-making contexts fathomable.<sup>9</sup> In so doing, such persons agree possibly to be placed in situations where incurring “moral residue” or “dirty hands” is likely, if not inevitable. Insofar as we think that exposure to physical risk ought to be as equitably apportioned among members of society as possible, so too should we think that exposure to moral risk and the likelihood of moral residue should be apportioned equitably and fairly within society. Presently, American soldiers find themselves to be frequent and repeated bearers of such moral risks and exposure to moral residue, disproportionately so compared with the overwhelming majority of the American population. This might then explain, if only partially, the disproportionate number of reports of “moral injury” among veterans when compared to civilian jobs of comparable or greater physical risk.<sup>10</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

Upon reading *Gratitude toward Veterans*, I am unsure who exactly Kershnar takes himself to be responding to and I am also left wondering what group or groups, if any, he would consider worthy bearers of gratitude from U.S. citizens. If his claim is that *all* veterans

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<sup>9</sup> This is to say nothing of the physical, psychological, and moral risks as well as risks to character and identity that soldiers in the future may soon take on as a result of “soldier enhancement” via physiological and/or neurological augmentation.

<sup>10</sup> For an extensive account of moral injury and soldiers, see Nancy Sherman, *Afterwar* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). For an account of soldiers’ incurring moral risk and moral residue, see Michael Robillard and Bradley Jay Strawser, “On the Moral Exploitation of Soldiers,” *Public Affairs Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (April 2016), pp. 171-96.



are not *equally* worthy of gratitude from American citizens in *all* cases (for reasons having to do with motivation, effort, epistemic conditions, etc.), then I'm not sure what is philosophically interesting or controversial about such a conclusion, nor do I know that many people would hold such an unqualified, categorical view. Once Kershnar begins qualifying and hedging on the initial claim suggested by the book's controversial sub-title, he ends up taking us to a place that I believe is reasonable and acceptable to many, namely, that U.S. citizens should have complex, fine-grained pro- or con-attitudes toward veterans, taking into account the specifics of each veteran's case to include considerations such as purity of motivation and effort. In so doing, however, much of the initial bite suggested by the book's sub-title ends up getting lost.

What's more, if the necessary and sufficient conditions Kershnar lays out for being worthy of gratitude fail to be satisfied by U.S. veterans in particular, it seems like a similar argument could nonetheless be leveled against any other group in society as well. For it is similarly false that *all* doctors, lawyers, farmers, intellectuals, and mothers are primarily altruistically motivated, equally trying to benefit U.S. citizens, and equally demonstrating the same reasonableness of effort. Members of such groups are not all equally sacrificing, equally risk-taking, or equally efficacious in their given pursuits as well. Perhaps a more accurate sub-title for his book should be something to the effect of, "Why Americans Should Not Be Very Grateful to Veterans . . . or Any Other Group for that Matter." Kershnar's criteria for gratitude-aptness seems equally applicable to any other group within society and therefore seems to make his special focus upon veterans in want of further explanation.

I found Kershnar's book to be both challenging and refreshing. It helped me to re-examine and clarify much of my own thinking with regard to what we think society owes to its veterans. Despite the specific criticisms I discuss above, I believe Kershnar's work to be a thought-provoking and original contribution that veterans and non-veterans alike should be grateful for.

