

Comment on Stephen Kershner's *Gratitude toward Veterans*

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1. Introduction

Veterans are everywhere. They run for public office, are pundits on cable television, serve as advocates in many political and social causes, write fiction and non-fiction, and are highly visible on social media. Phillip Klay, a fiction author and writer of non-fiction essays, spoke on the military-civilian culture gap at the Brookings Institute in the summer of 2016. Veteran Paul Rieckhoff founded Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America and is a regular presence on cable television and social media, where he advocates on a variety of veteran-related issues. These are only two examples of how popular culture is replete with manifestations of special gratitude and valorization of veterans (and their families by extension) as heroic. Stephen Kershner's *Gratitude toward Veterans: Why Americans Should Not Be Very Grateful to Veterans*¹ asks whether or not such gratitude is justified and why. He ultimately argues that it is misplaced and needs to be reassessed. I highlight several questions and concerns that I have with this line of argument, but ultimately will argue that his argument raises an important issue that merits further discussion and debate.

2. Overview of the Argument

The overall thesis of Kershner's book is that the U.S. is very grateful for veterans and has been in the past, but that the grounds for gratitude are flawed. Therefore, we should not be grateful in the future

¹ 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.

to veterans—both as individuals and as a group (p. xiii). First, he establishes that Americans are, in fact, very grateful to veterans, arguing that the best explanation of the various celebrations, displays, and phenomena like “Thank You For Your Service,” is that they are evidence of this feeling of gratitude. Second, he takes up the issue of collective gratitude to consider whether we can be grateful to a group. Since he argues in Chapter 1 that veterans as individuals do not intend to provide benefit in joining the military, then we cannot owe gratitude to veterans as a group. Third, he argues that we should not be very grateful to veterans because the grounds of gratitude toward veterans—motivation and benefit—are flawed. Both of these arguments hinge on the reasons or intentions of veterans in being members of the military, the extent of the actual benefit they provide in comparison to other groups, and whether they intend to provide benefit.

Fourth and fifth, Kershnar takes up the issue of the draft, arguing that we should not be very grateful to draftees and against the draft, respectively. These arguments seem related to an argument later in the book that the duty to obey orders is weak, and to a more general concern that if veterans are motivated either by the draft or more generally to obey orders, this seems a kind of benevolence that warrants gratitude (p. 81). If the case for the draft and obeying orders is weak, then it furthers the case that there is not benevolence or benefit here and that gratitude is not justified.

Sixth, Kershnar argues that in the future we should avoid being grateful (at all?) to veterans. One core point here is that this gratitude is not necessary to garner the protection that members of the military provide, so we can be protected without all of the displays and feelings of gratitude (p. 79). Finally, he addresses the idea of lack of gratitude and virtue to make the claim that lacking significant gratitude toward veterans is not a vice, thus one can still be virtuous. Hence, we are not doing anything immoral if we fail to demonstrate gratitude toward veterans, although perhaps we still could, but he thinks such gratitude is unfounded.

The book is brief and tightly written, with a style familiar in the Anglo-American analytic tradition of philosophy that focuses on formalized logic. Accordingly, it will be important to address this aspect of his premises, line of argument, and conclusions when determining whether or not he has made his case.

3. Being “Very Grateful” and Degrees of Gratitude

One of the central questions I raise about *Gratitude toward Veterans* revolves around what exactly the central claim is. Is Kershnar arguing that we ought not be “very grateful” to veterans? Is he arguing that a lesser degree of gratitude is appropriate? Or is he arguing that any degree of gratitude is not appropriate?

Multiple times in the first half of the book, Kershnar claims that we ought not be “very grateful” to all veterans or to veterans as a group for their sacrifice and service. He is clearly critiquing the traditional narrative of the military as those who serve and sacrifice on behalf of the nation, arguing, “[v]iewing your life in the military as a service or sacrifice is not only false, but also prevents you from focusing on what should guide your decisions” (p. 2). On the face of it, his argument seems to be that the current degree of gratitude (very grateful)—that we see embodied in civilians’ saying, “Thank You For Your Service,” applauding uniformed military personnel in public, and providing patriotic displays on Veterans and Memorial Day—is uncritical.

At other times, it seems that he is hinting at arguments for lessening the degree of gratitude that ought to be owed, while the title of Chapter 6 seems to suggest that in the future we should avoid *any* gratitude toward veterans. I would point out that the three questions above are really three different positions, so I would have liked more clarity as to which of them he is defending. Perhaps a more helpful framing question would have been to ask what degree, if any, of gratitude is morally required or appropriate toward veterans and on what grounds such gratitude would be justified. Kershnar is clearly interested in and spends most of the book engaging the question of what the grounds of such gratitude would be (eliminating what he sees as the most plausible candidates). However, if these grounds fail, it is not clear whether that means no gratitude is justified or whether these failures lessen the degree of gratitude that is owed but do not eliminate it (p. 32).

Kershnar argues that there are reasons, some self-interested, why people join the military and that for many there are aspects of the job that they find attractive and enjoyable, presumably undermining the claim that veterans join to benefit and serve society or as an act of patriotic sacrifice. His claim is that it is a job or career like others and that it should not be treated in a special way. Even if this claim holds, he does not address the fact that at least some of the jobs in the military carry with them a significant amount of physical, psychological, and

moral risk and chance of serious, life-altering injuries. This is the same issue as with other professions, such as law enforcement, emergency medical technicians, and firefighters, where individuals undertake certain kinds of risks for the protection and service of a public good. The fact that they may enjoy or be attracted to this kind of work does not mitigate or reduce the risks involved or the public good aspect of the work.

At this point, he would raise the issue of educators and farmers who also presumably are engaged in pursuits that are designed to benefit the public good, but who do not receive the same level of gratitude: “[C]itizens have an especially strong debt of gratitude that is not owed to other groups” (p. 38). The question is, then, whether there is something that warrants this level of gratitude. The most obvious answer, in his view, is the patriotic narrative of service to the nation and sacrifice, but that does not take into account the issue of risk that I raise above.

What is the point of the patriotic narrative? Kershnar argues that if the point of holidays and celebrations that are part of the manifestation of this special gratitude is to communicate a message of patriotism and sacrifice, the focus on what he views as the false belief in gratitude owed to veterans is problematic (p. 41). If we look more closely, though, I think that the message of Veterans and Memorial Day observances (and also Independence Day celebrations) is in fact public recognition of the sacrificial and service-oriented aspect of military service, which is viewed as requisite for the freedoms and liberties that civilians enjoy. If he is right, then these observances and celebrations are themselves problematic, as is the part of the patriotic narrative that claims that the sacrifice, especially death, of veterans is necessary to secure and preserve our nation in ways similar to police, fire, and other such professionals.

4. The Meaning of Gratitude

According to Kershnar, “Veterans do not join the military and once in it, do not do their jobs for purely beneficent motives” (p. 31). The argument implied here is that since veterans serve for mixed motives and do not intend solely to provide a benefit, then any benefit that comes from their service is merely a side-effect and does not warrant gratitude. Kershnar seems to want to require purely beneficent motives in order to ground gratitude—but why? Additionally, he argues that veterans as a group cannot intend to benefit others, and so gratitude to them as a group is not justified (p. 29). This seems odd,

since much military action is collective and so must involve collective intentions, or at least individual intentions carried out in concert and coordination to achieve some kind of collective end.

There are two parts to the claim here, which I shall distinguish. First, let's examine the claim that if motives are not pure, then there is no intention to benefit. No one claims that veterans have only beneficent motives—certainly not veterans themselves—so this is a bit of a non-starter. We agree that there are mixed motives. However, it does not follow from this that one of the motives cannot be sacrifice, that is, service with the idea of benefitting society or being a servant for the public good. For example, veterans who had joined the military after 9/11 explicitly cite this as one reason for joining, including ex-football player Pat Tillman. I might join to get money for college, job training, or out of a desire to serve my society. Mothers do not have purely unselfish motives, but we would not say that they do not provide and intend to provide a benefit to their children, nor educators or farmers who Kershnar thinks intend to provide benefits for the public good.

Second, we'll turn to the claim that if there is no intention to benefit, then there ought not be gratitude, or alternatively, a lesser level of gratitude is justified. Let's look at an example where my young son goes to bingo night at his school and wins a prize. He does not want the particular prize (bubble bath), and so chooses to give it to me. He did not intend to benefit me. He got a prize that he did not want; rather than just throw it away, he gives it to his mother. He did not set out to make me happy; it is a side-effect, so I should not be grateful. But I am! Why? Because my son gave me something that I value or like. The gift is something that shows he cares about me, even though that was not his original intent; he demonstrated benevolence toward me. He did not intend to play bingo to get a prize for his mother; he merely wanted to win a prize. The point here is that an intention to benefit may not be necessary to generate some degree of gratitude.

In addition, I think there is a difference between *showing* gratitude and feeling or *believing* that one ought to be grateful, where Kershnar takes the first as evidence of the second. I think this is highly problematic because of the military-civilian culture gap and the disengagement that many civilians have from matters of the military and war.² I would say that such actions discussed above as

² As documented in Sebastian Junger, *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging* (New York: Hackett Book Group, 2016); see esp. pp. 110-11 on the disconnection with the U.S. population.

demonstrations of gratitude are evidence that civilians think that they are *expected* to show gratitude and *want* to be seen by veterans and members of the military as grateful, but none of this shows that they *actually* are grateful. My kids know that they are to say, “Thank you,” when they receive a gift from their grandparents. It hardly follows that they *actually feel* grateful for that knitted, neon orange sweater.

In the case of civilians, few are able to articulate exactly what they are grateful for, in Kershner’s terms, concerning the nature of the benefit received (pp. 21-22). To the degree that they are able to articulate what the gratitude is for or what the benefit is, it is vague and unformed. This would seem to support his argument that there is not really a clear benefit here, or at the very least, that we overestimate the importance of the benefit, as we underestimate other benefits by other groups.

Another critical point Kershner makes is whether all veterans warrant gratitude and, if so, whether they all warrant the same level (pp. 24 and 29). This is important, since it universally valorizes veterans and military members (and by extension their families) as morally heroic. We valorize all who serve, despite the fact that only some throw themselves on grenades and die to save others, while others serve without distinction or even serve immorally. As I have argued elsewhere, there are many problems with the idea of universal valorization, which has political reasons undergirding this.³ This then gets us back to what the real point of the patriotic narrative is, what role service and sacrifice have in that narrative, and whether there ought to be some kind of equality between citizens’ contributions. Why are military service contributions more valuable? Do they provide more benefit? Is the issue of risk at play? Is the public any better able to articulate these benefits? What if the problem is not the benefit, but being knowledgeable of and being able to articulate it?

5. Military Professionalism versus Mercenaries

Finally, Kershner argues that we can be protected by the military without gratitude (or much gratitude?) (p. 79). We accrue benefits from educators and farmers without these “excessive” displays, so he thinks that the same could be true for the military. His

³ See Pauline Kaurin, *The Warrior, Military Ethics, and Contemporary Warfare: Achilles Goes Asymmetric* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014); see esp. pp. 21ff on the Politics of Courage.

view is that we pay them and provide benefits to do the job of protecting the country, and so gratitude need not be part of the equation.

I think this argument is problematic because it ignores the important moral and practical distinctions between members of the military and mercenaries (or contractors, if one prefers a less pejorative term). It also ignores completely the role of military professionalism that is internalized and taken seriously as a part of military culture, especially for officers and non-commissioned officers.⁴ The military thinks of itself and operates as a rigorous profession, especially in the sense of having an expert body of knowledge, being self-regulating, serving the common good, and having socially sanctioned permission to kill people and destroy property. In this way, they are like the police, fire, legal, and medical professions. All of these professions receive a certain kind of public respect and approbation, as noted in the discussion above.

As I have argued elsewhere, the various oaths that military members take entail joining a certain kind of moral community, which for many involves taking up new moral obligations and sense of identity.⁵ An oath in this context is complex and represents a multifaceted obligation to the state, the American people, the Constitution and laws of the land, peers, superiors and subordinates within the military organization, and the values and norms that are part of these overlapping communities. The literature on military professionalism is important to consider here, especially in the light of Kershnar's critiques of the duty to obey; this literature provides insight into why the military is viewed in a fundamentally different way by the civilians and the military itself.

It may be the case that Kershnar is right that there is no obligation to be "very" grateful, but how grateful ought one be? The argument, if he is making such an argument, that there is no obligation to show any degree of gratitude is odd. The discourse around valorizing public servants (especially ones who take great risks) is part

⁴ See Samuel Huntington, *The Soldier and the State* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1981), a classic text on military professionalism; see also Department of the Army, *ADRP-1: The Army Profession* (Washington, D.C., 2015), for examples of this discussion.

⁵ See Kaurin, *The Warrior, Military Ethics, and Contemporary Warfare*, pp. 83ff.

of this, and seems to be rooted to some degree in the military-civilian culture gap and the disengagement of the American public from matters of national security, rather than in the idea that the military is not providing a unique benefit that warrants approbation.

I do think there are fair questions here about how much and what kinds of public gratitude veterans ought to expect and civilians ought to demonstrate. There are also important questions about whether we ought to make distinctions about the kinds of gratitude that are warranted. That would require more knowledge, engagement, and a willingness to make distinctions about the kinds of service veterans render, which moves us away from treating veterans as individuals rather than as a group. A move to finer-grained discrimination and assessment of the service and contributions of individual veterans would fit with Kershner's rejection of the idea that they provide or intend to provide a collective benefit.

6. Future Questions to Consider

While I have raised some critical questions and objections relative to Kershner's account, I think that there are three core questions that merit further discussion and examination of this topic. First, what degree of gratitude, if any, is warranted to extend to veterans—either as individuals or as a group? He seems to push us toward the conclusion that no gratitude is warranted. However, I am inclined to think that the issue should be what level of gratitude is warranted, given the unique aspects of the military as a profession and the risks and sacrifices involved.

Second, recent discussion of military-civilian relations, especially in regard to moral injury and Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome, raise important questions about what this service costs, and whether we ought to consider the moral, mental, and psychological risks that military members undertake as part of their service. It may be that part of the "excessive" gratitude that Kershner highlights has less to do with the protection and service to the state rendered by the military, but what costs they, their families, and communities are expected to bear. These are costs that seem above and beyond what we expect from other jobs and professions, so that needs to be part of the equation.

Third, Kershner raises an important question of whether there are other groups of public servants that warrant appreciation at this level. Perhaps the issue is that all persons who serve the public good should enjoy the same level of valorization and approbation as veterans

receive. Or should it be the case that public gratitude for all those who serve the public good be supererogatory rather than obligatory?

