

Avoiding Excessive Gratitude toward Veterans and
Why It Matters:
A Response to Michael Robillard and Pauline Shanks
Kaurin

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1. Introduction

In *Gratitude toward Veterans: Why Americans Should Not Be Very Grateful to Veterans*, I argue for the following theses:

Thesis #1: Gratitude for the Past. In the United States citizens should not be very grateful to veterans.

Thesis #2: Gratitude for the Future. In the future, United States citizens should avoid being grateful to veterans.¹

I focus in this article on the first thesis, the argument for which is:

(P1) If one person should be very grateful to a second, then the second tried to benefit the first in the relevant way.

(P2) If (P1), then if one group should be very grateful to a second, then in general, the second tried to benefit the first in the relevant way.

(C1) Hence, if one group should be very grateful to a second, then in general, the second tried to benefit the first in the relevant way. [(P1), (P2)]

(P3) It is false that as a group, veterans tried to benefit the citizens in the relevant way.

¹ See Stephen Kershner, *Gratitude toward Veterans: Why Americans Should Not Be Very Grateful to Veterans* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014).

(C2) Hence, citizens should not be very grateful to veterans.
[(C1), (P3)]

The theory of gratitude that underlies this argument is as follows. One person is grateful to a second if and only if the first is thankful or appreciative of the second for having done a beneficent act. One person should be very grateful to a second if and only if the second tried to benefit the first in the relevant way. The second person tried to benefit the first in the relevant way if and only if the second reasonably attempted to provide a significant benefit to the first and the second was primarily motivated by concern for the first's well-being. Perhaps this could be met if the person were strongly motivated rather than primarily motivated.

By significant gratitude, I mean gratitude that is frequent and intense. It is the sort of gratitude that is significant in the sense that it sets apart the person to whom gratitude is owed from the bulk of people with whom one normally interacts. The widespread public celebrations of veterans and thoughts that motivate and accompany these celebrations meet these conditions.

The following conditions, then, are necessary for significant gratitude.

Condition #1: Motivation. The benefactor's primary motivation was to provide the benefit.

Condition #2: Trying. The benefactor tried to provide a significant benefit.

Condition #3: Epistemic Condition. The benefactor's effort was reasonable. That is, it rested on adequate evidence.

In *Gratitude toward Veterans*, I argue that U.S. citizens should not be very grateful to veterans for what they've done in the past because they don't meet these conditions.

Michael Robillard and Pauline Shanks Kaurin provide superb comments and criticisms of the book.² It is a real pleasure to have such

² Michael Robillard, "A Case for Gratitude: A Response to Stephen Kershner's *Gratitude toward Veterans*," *Reason Papers* 39, no. 1 (Summer 2017), pp. 65-73; Pauline Shanks Kaurin, "Comment on Stephen Kershner's *Gratitude toward Veterans*," *Reason Papers* 39, no. 1 (Summer 2017), pp. 74-82.

outstanding philosophers raise significant lines of criticism. I address what I find to be the three most interesting. First, they criticize the conditions for gratitude. Second, they criticize my concern that if veterans meet these conditions, then so do other groups. Third, they argue that the individual variation on veterans satisfying the conditions for significant gratitude makes the book's conclusion trivial. Let us consider these objections in turn.

2. The Conditions for Significant Gratitude Are Mistaken

a. The motivation condition is mistaken

Robillard and Kaurin argue that the three conditions on significant gratitude are mistaken. That is, they reject (P1). Robillard argues that it is not clear that a benefactor needs to be motivated primarily by concern for a beneficiary in order for the latter to owe him or her a debt of gratitude. He provides the following case in support of this claim.

Case #1: 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.³

There are some concerns I have about this case. First, this case is misleading because it is difficult to imagine the daredevil choosing to save the person on the sinking raft without having any beneficent motivation.

Second, the issue here is when a beneficiary should be very grateful. Even if the daredevil's beneficiary should be grateful to a small degree, this is not enough to show that significant gratitude is owed. Third, the cases discussed below suggest that in the case of Daredevil, the beneficiary owes him no gratitude rather than a small amount. It might be virtuous to express gratitude, when another person benefits us, as a sign of awareness of the value of other people's time and energy without this expression reflecting real gratitude. This might

³ Robillard, "A Case for Gratitude," p. 69.

occur, for example, when a woman expresses gratitude to a sports legend whom she greatly enjoyed watching when she was a child. This is also similar to how a man might apologize if, due to no fault of his own, his brakes failed and his car smashed into a pedestrian. There is nothing for him to be sorry for, yet it seems polite, and perhaps virtuous, to acknowledge that he was connected to the pedestrian being seriously injured and that he is feeling bad about the result and his connection to it. In contrast, consider the following cases where the benefactor is not motivated to benefit the beneficiary.

Case #2: Oil

Al benefits Seth by making him rich. Al invests much of his money and gets badly injured drilling for oil. He discovers a massive oil deposit under both of their properties. Once he begins to extract it, Seth does the same and gets rich. Al couldn't care less about Seth and didn't try to help him.

My intuitions are that Seth need not be very grateful to Al. Perhaps he should have some gratitude, although even that is intuitively unclear to me.

Case #3: Husband

I am drowning, as is my mistress. I lose consciousness and slip underwater. Her husband throws in a life preserver and begins to pull her into shore. She wraps her legs around me and pulls me to shore with her. I live. Her husband does not know I am in the water and would not have saved me had he known.

Again, in this case the narrator need not be very grateful to the husband. These cases are clearer than Daredevil because they illustrate a benefactor who does not care about or, in the second case, know about his beneficiary. In both cases, it intuitively seems that the beneficiary need not be very grateful to the benefactor.

Robillard might be arguing that gratitude, rather than significant gratitude, is owed. I don't have that intuition, but, in any case, we are interested in significant gratitude. One might be glad that the daredevil, Al, and the husband exist and acted the way they did, but this is different from being grateful to them.

Robillard might instead be arguing that significant gratitude is owed when one person knowingly benefits another. This is incorrect. Consider, for example, cases when Al and the husband know they are

benefitting another, but have neither the motivation nor intention to do so. Again, it intuitively seems that significant gratitude is not owed. It is unclear whether any gratitude is owed.

b. The trying condition is mistaken

The trying condition indicates that the person purportedly owed gratitude did something to try to make another person's life go better. My claim is that a person who is motivated to benefit another but who did not try to do so is not owed significant gratitude. Again, it is unclear if she is owed any gratitude. My intuition is that she is not, although one might be grateful for her motivation. Motivation might be an accomplishment that results from past actions. In some cases, one person has to invest time and energy into another person before she becomes motivated to significantly benefit the other. In contrast, Kaurin argues that the trying condition is not necessary for generating significant gratitude. Here is her case.

Case #4: Son

[M]y 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. . . . The point here is that an intention to benefit may not be necessary to generate some degree of gratitude.⁴

My intuition is that the mother (Kaurin) should not be very grateful to her son for giving her the prize because he did not try to benefit her. Perhaps she should be grateful for his love. Even this is unclear if the child did not work toward it. For example, if we neuro-manipulate a neighboring child so that he loves Kaurin as much as her son does, intuitively, she should not be very grateful to him. Kaurin might be very glad her son loves her so much, but this is different from being very grateful to him. If her son did not work toward loving her, then he

⁴ Kaurin, "Comment on Stephen Kershner's *Gratitude toward Veterans*," p. 78 (emphasis mine).

would not deserve anything for his love. At least this would be true for types of desert that rest on hard work or sacrifice.

What is driving our intuition in Son is that Kaurin loves her son in part because he loves her. Love differs from gratitude because they are different attitudes with different grounds. This can be seen in the following case.

Case #5: Daughter

A mother has cancer and is suffering. Her adult daughter wants to help her, but can't because she is in prison for robbery. As a result, the mother gets rock-bottom institutional care and is desperately lonely while she wastes away. Eventually, she dies neglected and alone.

In this case, the mother does not owe the daughter gratitude for trying to benefit her because she did not try to do so (on account of her imprisonment). She still might love her daughter and be grateful for her daughter's love.

Even if Robillard and Kaurin were correct and neither motivation nor trying were necessary for significant gratitude, the epistemic condition must still be met. This condition requires that the benefactor's effort was reasonable, that is, it rested on adequate evidence. This would not be met by veterans who knew or should have known that they would likely participate in wars that are imprudent or unconstitutional. Here, I merely raise the issue of whether volunteers should have known this about World War I and about American involvement in Vietnam (at least later in the war), Serbia, Iraq, Libya, and Syria.

That the epistemic condition is plausible can be seen in cases such as the following.

Case #6: Bad Doctor

Bob is suffering from a treatable cancer. Physician Charley (also known as "good-time Charley") is an incompetent drunk. He tries to treat Bob but because he confused different types of cancer medicine, he ends up having no effect on the spreading cancer or its symptoms. Charley was grossly negligent in not looking up types of medicine or checking with his colleagues. He did, however, try hard to remember the medicine-types.

Intuitively, Bob should not be very grateful to Charley because his effort was unreasonable.

c. Significant gratitude is owed, at least in part, for something other than one person trying to benefit another in the relevant way

Robillard and Kaurin also argue that there is a fourth condition for gratitude or, perhaps, significant gratitude. Robillard implicitly suggests that gratitude should track sacrifice when he discusses the sacrifices made by soldiers. This can be seen in Robillard's argument that members of the military take significant moral and physical risks:

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.⁵

He argues that such risks should be equitably apportioned to members of society and, instead, are concentrated in the military.⁶

One problem with this line of reasoning is that a risk is not itself a harm, but some probability of harm. As a result, it is not something that is, by itself, bad for someone. It is preferable to focus on the harm (or sacrifice) when it occurs rather than on the chance that it may happen.

A second problem with Robillard's concern is that it is unclear why such risks should be equitably apportioned. People often trade off risk for money, excitement, friendship, and so on. Also, the same level of risk affects people differently insofar as they differ in risk-aversion. Given trade-offs and difference in risk-aversion, it is unclear why risk should be equitably distributed to members of society rather than equitably distributing a more fundamental good such as well-being, opportunity, or primary goods.

⁵ Robillard, "A Case for Gratitude," p. 72.

⁶ For a discussion of moral risk and injury, see Michael Robillard and Bradley Jay Strawser, "On the Moral Exploitation of Soldiers," *Public Affairs Quarterly* 30 (2016), pp. 171-96, and Nancy Sherman, *Afterwar* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

Consider the notion that combat veterans took great risks in fighting overseas. Not all veterans saw combat. In addition, different jobs have different costs and benefits. A person is free to take a job or not take it. If he takes it, particularly if he does so because he likes the cost-benefit package, then so long as he is paid and faces predictable costs and risks, he has no business demanding gratitude. Nor does he merit it.

In order to see this point, compare the fatality rate of three jobs: military, logging, and fisherman. Mortality rates are lower among U.S. military members than their civilian counterparts. During the years in which major combat operations were ongoing, fewer members of the military died from war-related injuries than died from other injuries (for example, transportation accidents and suicides).⁷ According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, fatality rates/average salaries for other professions in 2008 were: fisherman (0.13%) and logging (0.12%).⁸ The salaries of fishermen and loggers are lower than that of the military and the fatality-risk is roughly the same. Fishermen and loggers miss out on some hardships (for example, they might spend less time away from their families), but they also miss out on some benefits (for example, they might not form the same lasting friendships or take as much pride in what they do). Factory workers might take far less risk than members of the military. On the other hand, members of the military have jobs that are more exciting, allow them to see the world, make them more proud of who they are and what they do, have much less chance of layoff or firing, allow for early retirement, and pay more. The attractiveness of various cost-benefit packages varies from person to person. If someone chooses one package (for example, military) over another (for example, factory) knowing the costs and risks, it is difficult to see why Americans should be grateful to him.

On a side note, it is difficult to see why members of the military serve others rather than merely work for them. Yet is it often said that soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines serve, whereas factory

⁷ See Armed Forces Health Surveillance Center, "Deaths While on Active Duty in the U.S. Armed Forces, 1990-2011," *Medical Surveillance Medical Report* 19, no. 5 (2012), pp. 2-5.

⁸ See Bureau of Labor Statistics, "News," *National Census of Fatal Occupation Injuries in 2008*, August 20, 2009, accessed online at: https://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/cfoi_08202009.pdf.

workers, government lawyers, and librarians work. It is an interesting issue whether the different expressions are mistaken in a way related to mistaken gratitude.

Robillard might concede that perhaps we shouldn't be grateful to veterans or combat veterans, but we should be grateful to the ones who were injured or killed. To see why this is mistaken, consider people who win a lottery. The lottery is fair if it was reasonable to the lottery players and owner when the ticket was purchased. If it was reasonable to both, then neither party need be grateful to the other. Next consider a reverse lottery where players get a good sum of money in return for taking a small risk of death or severe injury (perhaps, they will have to donate an organ). Again, if reasonable, no gratitude is owed. Military service is like a reverse lottery. If the contract was reasonable when members signed up, then Americans need not be grateful to those who sign it.

Kaurin suggests that gratitude can be owed for the professionalism of the military.⁹ By this, she means that members of the military act as a profession in that they meet a set of criteria that are akin to those of other professions:

[Kershner's theory] 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. 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.¹⁰

⁹ For an interesting discussion of professionalism, see Samuel Huntington, *The Soldier and the State* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1981). For an account that ties professionalism into a sense of identity and shared moral obligations, see Pauline Kaurin, *The Warrior, Military Ethics, and Contemporary Warfare: Achilles Goes Asymmetric* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014).

¹⁰ Kaurin, "Comment on Stephen Kershner's *Gratitude toward Veterans*," p. 80.

She also discusses, but does not endorse, the idea that gratitude is owed for being the source of the patriotic narrative. This narrative views military membership as involving service, sacrifice, and protecting American freedom.

The problem with these ideas is that an individual's participation in a profession that contributes to a patriotic narrative warrants gratitude only if she satisfies the three conditions of motivation, trying, and epistemic condition. It intuitively seems that Americans should not be very grateful to, for example, Senators, despite their participation in a profession that has a patriotic narrative because they do not satisfy the three conditions to a significant degree. Instead, professionalism and patriotic narrative are relevant, if at all, because they are ways that workers try to benefit significantly the American people. If so, Kaurin's point fits into my overall argument.

d. Using clear cases to test the conditions for significant gratitude

Another way to see that the three conditions are correct is to see whether they categorize clear cases in the right way. Consider most mothers. They often act from beneficence and make a great effort to provide a significant benefit to their children. Hence, in most cases, their children should be very grateful to them. Consider, next, National League Football (NFL) players with regard to the fans. In most cases, they do not meet these conditions. For example, they often do not act from beneficence to fans. Hence, in most cases, their fans should not be very grateful to them. These results intuitively seem correct. We can now ask to which group veterans are more similar.

With regard to Americans, veterans are more similar to NFL players than to mothers. It is unclear whether they are more beneficently motivated to benefit Americans than NFL players are to benefit their fans. Neither has the incredibly strong beneficent motivation of a mother. Nor is it even clear whether on an individual basis they try to provide a greater benefit. It is also unclear whether an individual member of the military contributes more to Americans' well-being than do NFL players contribute to their fans. There are far fewer players than there are members of the military. A particularly talented general or admiral might greatly affect Americans' aggregate well-being, but such individuals are rare. In addition, a particularly talented coach or player might do the same for their fans.¹¹ Even the

¹¹ On common economic assumptions, a person's contribution to others' well-being roughly correlates with his income. This rests on three free-market

comparative sacrifice is unclear. While members of the military risk death and various psychological ailments, members of the NFL risk brain and musculoskeletal injury and do so more frequently.¹² Hence, not only do the three conditions get the intuitively right result with regard to significant gratitude for mothers and NFL players, they further support the notion that Americans should not be very grateful to veterans.

Kaurin notes that mothers do not have purely unselfish motives, and Robillard similarly notes that not all mothers are primarily altruistically motivated.¹³ This might be true, but so long as the vast majority act from very strong beneficent motives, and my guess is they do, the average mother is owed significant gratitude from her children.

e. There is no duty to be grateful

Robillard and Kaurin object that the notion of a duty of gratitude that is (at least in part) satisfied by an attitude is mistaken. Robillard argues that there might not be a duty to be grateful, merely a reason to be so.¹⁴ Kaurin argues that there might be a duty to show gratitude rather than actually be grateful.¹⁵ With regard to Robillard's

assumptions. First, the more something makes someone's life go better, the more it satisfies his prioritized desires. Second, the more something satisfies someone's prioritized desires, the more he is willing to pay for it. Third, the market aggregates people's willingness to pay for something. Thus, if Tom Brady is worth \$180 million, then, in the aggregate, he has contributed a lot to people's lives. For Brady's net worth, see "Tom Brady Net Worth," *Celebrity Net Worth*, accessed online at: <https://www.celebritynetworth.com/richest-athletes/nfl/tom-brady-net-worth/>.

¹² For the notion that NFL players regularly suffer from traumatic brain injury, see Tom Goldman, "Study: CTE Found in Nearly All Donated NFL Player Brains," *NPR.org*, July 25, 2017, accessed online at: <http://www.npr.org/2017/07/25/539198429/study-cte-found-in-nearly-all-donated-nfl-player-brains>.

¹³ Kaurin, "Comment on Stephen Kershner's *Gratitude toward Veterans*," p. 78, and Robillard, "A Case for Gratitude," p. 69.

¹⁴ Robillard, "A Case for Gratitude," p. 68.

¹⁵ Kaurin, "Comment on Stephen Kershner's *Gratitude toward Veterans*," p. 79.

point, I am skeptical of an impersonal non-consequentialist reason. With regard to Kaurin's point, I am skeptical of a non-contractual duty to show gratitude that does not include or rest on a duty to be grateful. Even if these objections are correct, they do not set back the overall argument because the argument can be restated in terms of a gratitude-related reason or in terms of the duty to show gratitude. Such a restatement leaves intact the thrust of the overall argument.

3. The Argument That If Veterans Are Owed Significant Gratitude Then So Are Other Groups Is Mistaken

In *Gratitude toward Veterans*, I mention the following comparative argument against significant gratitude to veterans:

- (1) If we should be very grateful to veterans, then we should be very grateful to farmers, sanitation workers, intellectuals, first responders (police and firefighters), and teachers.
- (2) We should not be very grateful to farmers, sanitation workers, intellectuals, first responders, and teachers.
- (3) Hence, we should not be very grateful to veterans. [(1), (2)]

The idea behind (1) is that Americans' lives would be horrendous if no one were to perform any of these jobs. If the baseline is people other than the current members occupying these jobs, though, it is not clear that Americans would be much worse off with the likely replacements. If the focus is on an individual, then it is likely that the American people as a whole would not be much worse off with his likely replacement. Few individuals have a big effect on their country or the people who constitute it.

Robillard and Kaurin discuss the notion that significant gratitude is owed to veterans as well as several other groups that, in the aggregate, contribute greatly to our well-being. They discuss rejecting the second premise of this argument, although they do not clearly endorse it. Kaurin states, "Perhaps the issue is that all persons who serve the public good should enjoy the same level of valorization and approbation as veterans receive."¹⁶ One reason that we should accept (2) is that if ought implies can, it is not clear that we can be very grateful to all of these groups.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 81-82.

American people are very grateful to members of the military. This gratitude can be seen in explicit and implicit expressions. The former takes the form of Presidential statements, holidays, statues and memorials, and public praise. The latter takes the form of generous compensation and affirmative-action benefits. Imagine if the country tried to do the same for other groups. Five times as many holidays, statues, memorials, elevated compensation, etc. would harm the economy, clutter public spaces, significantly increase taxes, and cause a serious shift in public expenditures. This assumes there are only five other groups sufficiently similar to veterans and that some have not been left out (for example, health professionals). In addition, there would likely be gratitude fatigue. Significant gratitude to too many groups might result in the American people not being very grateful to any of them. Even if expanding gratitude to all of these groups were financially and psychologically possible, and I am not sure it is, it is not practical.

4. The Book's Conclusion Is Trivial

Robillard and Kaurin argue that if the book finds merely that veterans differ in the amount of gratitude they are owed, this is trivial and uninteresting. According to Robillard:

If [Kershner's] claim is that *all* veterans 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 Kershner 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.¹⁷

Given this criticism, it is worth setting out the book's controversial claim and why it matters. The controversial claim is that for the

¹⁷ Robillard, "A Case for Gratitude," pp. 72-73.

average veteran, Americans should not be very grateful to him. This is in sharp contrast with American attitudes and practices. In particular, it conflicts with common attitudes and with Presidential statements, holidays, statues and memorials, public praise, generous compensation, and affirmative-action benefits. The book raises the issue of whether Americans should be far more grateful to veterans than they are to farmers, sanitation workers, intellectuals, and so on. They currently are far more grateful.

There are three reasons this claim matters. First, mistaken gratitude might provide inefficient inducements for people to go into the military rather than other fields. Second, if mistaken gratitude is wrong or bad, then it is wrong or bad here. The incredible frequency with which these mistaken attitudes are held makes the problem worse. Third, mistaken gratitude might bleed into unrelated areas, such as elections and policy decisions. The overrepresentation of military men and women in Congress and the White House suggests that this concern is a real one. This might also be seen in the tendency to double down on failing policies in which significant numbers of veterans' lives have been lost and to treat such sunk costs as a reason to continue the policy in question. Hence, the theses matter and, perhaps, matter a lot.

