

'Filling the Ranks': Moral Risk and the Ethics of Military Recruitment

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1. Introduction

If states are permitted to create and maintain a military force, by what means may they do so? This question is surprisingly neglected by moral and political theorists.¹ The just war literature focuses on the justification of initiating and conducting war. But though states place themselves in a position to go to war by recruiting and training a military, this aspect of war-making has received relatively little attention.² Theorists of distributive justice evaluate the allocation of benefits and burdens within a society. But this work tends to focus on the distribution of resources, rather than occupational roles.³ And among theorists who do consider the distribution of occupations, the military occupation is largely ignored.

This paper does not offer a general theory of just recruitment. Rather, we aim to shed light on an important, and under-appreciated, consideration that should inform such a theory: recruitment policies involve the state exposing its members to *moral risk*. Moral risk is the risk of engaging in serious moral wrongdoing. Our central proposal is that recruitment policies can be evaluated in terms of how they distribute a morally risky occupation within a community.

To make the proposal more concrete, our discussion centres on four features of military recruitment that are common (to varying degrees) to many states' practices:

- The *youth* of typical recruits.
- The concentration of recruitment activities in areas of *socioeconomic deprivation*.
- The involvement of the military and military-related industries *in educational settings*.
- That recruitment takes place within a wider culture of *celebration and reverence for the military*.

These practices have often been subject to moral criticism. We agree with the critics that these features are intuitively morally problematic. But the rationale is rather inchoate. What exactly grounds this judgement? Our proposal offers a novel diagnosis: These features are distinctively objectionable insofar as they exacerbate and concentrate moral risk exposure. This objection demands special justification or reform of current practices.

¹ As Cheyney Ryan (2022:188) pithily puts it, "In the field of philosophy, there are more articles on what it is like to be a bat than what it's like to be a soldier."

² For exceptions, see e.g. Dobos (2020), Robillard and Strawser (2022) and Ryan (2009). There is a small literature on the 'macro' ethics of military recruitment: the question of whether to recruit a volunteer force or use a system of conscription. See e.g. Pattison (2011), Sagdahl (2018) and Galston (2003). But little work evaluates the different means of creating a volunteer military.

³ Though the trend does seem to be shifting. See e.g. Kandiyali (2023), Schouten (2016), Parr (2022), Gheaus and Herzog (2016).

The paper proceeds as follows. We begin, in Section 2, by motivating our moral risk-based proposal, by contrasting it with an alternative moral criticism of recruitment. The following sections develop the proposal in more detail, and draw out its implications. In Section 3, we defend the background assumption that the military is a morally risky occupation for its members. In Section 4, we argue that persons have a presumptive claim against exposure to moral risk, which grounds duties not to expose others to moral risk (and to take positive steps to reduce their exposure). This duty is grounded in persons' weighty interest in avoiding serious moral wrongdoing, and in the importance of respecting others' moral capacities. In Section 5, we outline a range of mechanisms by which we can expose others to moral risk. In Section 6, we illustrate how these mechanisms are frequently manifested in military recruitment policies. To do so, we critically examine military recruitment as practised in the UK. Though our general approach and conclusions are applicable much more widely, we think this is a particularly illuminating case study, because the four features of recruitment outlined above are particularly salient in the UK context. We argue that UK practices are presumptively unjust, insofar as they transgress would-be recruits' claims against moral risk exposure. This injustice is aggravated by the fact that the state has a special duty to safeguard the interests and capacities of its young people. In Section 7, we respond to the claim that this risk exposure can be justified by appealing to the overall benefits of giving young persons the opportunity for a military career. In the absence of this justification, states wrong their members by subjecting them to UK-style recruitment practices. Section 8 concludes by drawing out the implications of our approach.

2. Beyond Harm: The Case for Moral Risk

We start by highlighting the limitations of a common and very natural line of criticism of military recruitment practices. This view emphasises the fact that the military is a potentially *dangerous* profession. The objection has two strands. The first points out that military personnel are exposed to increased risks of death or physical injury, as well as psychological trauma and mental illness.⁴ Moreover, there is evidence that the younger a person joins the military, the greater these risks.⁵ The second part of the objection casts doubt on whether the typical recruit validly consent to these risks, given their immaturity, lack of full information, and paucity of alternative options.⁶ States' recruitment practices are thus charged with failing to take seriously their obligations not to expose young people to risks of harm.

Though correct, we contend that the harm-based critique is importantly incomplete, for two reasons. First, it fails to capture the intuitive asymmetry between military service and other dangerous professions. Consider physically dangerous careers (such as deep sea fishing or playing professional American football), as well as jobs that involve significant risks of psychological trauma (such as online content moderators.) These roles are plausibly at least as physically or psychologically dangerous as many military careers. But it nonetheless seems more objectionable to recruit disadvantaged young people into the military profession than for other

⁴ Medact (2016) documents young recruits increased risk of PTSD, suicide, self-harm, and alcohol misuse.

⁵ Gee and Goodman (2013) found that 16-year old recruits were twice as likely to be killed or injured in Afghanistan, compared to those who enlisted post-18. Other research indicates that youth and childhood adversity (a factor associated with socioeconomic disadvantage) increase vulnerability to mental health problems among recruits (Campbell, 2022).

⁶ Gee (2007); Medact (2016).

risky jobs (holding the means of recruitment constant). The harm-based objection to military recruitment seems unable to account for this moral difference.

Second, the harm-based view struggles to explain the intuition that military recruitment would remain objectionable even if the risks of physical and psychological harms were eliminated from military service. Imagine, for example, that a military develops advanced body-armour which renders its personnel completely invulnerable. Or that a military develops fully remote capabilities, whereby all dangerous roles are performed by drones and robots, operated by human personnel in complete safety. Imagine, furthermore, that personnel are given an entirely safe medication which will prevent them suffering any psychological trauma or distress.⁷ In this (not wildly) hypothetical military, personnel would not be exposed to any risk of harm. Yet there remains something intuitively morally objectionable about recruiting disadvantaged young people into a zero-risk military. The harm-based objection cannot explain this.

A full normative evaluation of military recruitment therefore requires moving beyond a focus on harm. We propose that the missing objection to recruitment practices lies in the fact that the military is a *morally risky* profession. A profession is morally risky insofar as its members are subject to an increased likelihood of committing serious moral wrongs. On this view, we should not only be concerned about exposing young people to a risk of being killed and injured, but also about exposing them to an increased risk of becoming (wrongful) killers and injurers. This emphasis on moral risk accounts for the two cases that the harm-based view struggled with: While other hazardous professions may be at least as dangerous as a military career, there remains an asymmetry of moral risk. And even if a military were able to eliminate all risk of physical and psychological harm, the profession remains morally risky for its members.

3. The Military as a Morally Risky Profession

We take our starting assumption – that serving in the military involves significant moral risk – to be relatively uncontroversial.⁸ War involves killing and maiming, destroying homes and livelihoods, forcing people to become refugees, and many other horrors. If a war is unjustified, these constituent harms are serious moral wrongs.⁹ These wrongs are inflicted by military personnel. Given the significant risk that any operation will be morally unjustified, military personnel are subject to a significant risk of engaging in serious moral wrongdoing.¹⁰ Note that this is compatible with the claim that combatants are often not *blameworthy* for participating in unjust wars. Excused wrongdoing is still wrongdoing. So, a profession that carries a significant risk of excused wrongdoing remains morally risky in the relevant sense.

This view relies on the idea that the moral status of combatants' actions in war depends on the moral status of the war itself. This is sometimes called a 'revisionist' view of the ethics of war.¹¹

⁷ On the pharmacological possibilities, see Dobos (2023).

⁸ Of course, we are not claiming that other professions are not morally risky. For one example, see Rosenthal (forthcoming).

⁹ For complications, see e.g. Tadros (2016a) and Bazargan (2011). These complications do not undermine our general claim that the military is a morally risky profession.

¹⁰ For further arguments, see Strawser (forthcoming) and McMahan (2013). For additional sources of moral risk within the military profession, see Wolfendale and Portis (2021) and Robillard (2017).

¹¹ For a canonical defence, see McMahan (2009).

We find this extremely plausible, as do the majority of theorists who have considered the issue. Moreover, the idea that fighting in an unjust war involves personal wrongdoing is also endorsed by many combatants.¹² However, one might deny that the military is a morally risky profession by denying that the moral status of participating in war is sensitive to the moral status of the war. According to so-called ‘orthodox’ just war theory, it is morally permissible to participate in an unjust war provided one follow the norms of *jus in bello*.¹³ Hence, the risk of being ordered to participate in unjustified operations is not a significant source of personal moral risk.

As indicated, we think this view is simply mistaken. But here are two responses which do not rely on this claim. First, almost all military operations carry a significant risk of violating *jus in bello* norms (i.e. committing war crimes). On an orthodox account, participating in these wrongs is a source of serious personal wrongdoing. So, even on an orthodox view the military profession includes a significant element of moral risk.

The second response appeals to moral uncertainty. Even if one is convinced that the orthodox view is correct, one’s confidence cannot be unreasonably high. The revisionist view rests on an extremely plausible general principle that seems obviously true in contexts other than war: other-things-being-equal, the wrongfulness of an activity transmits to participation in that activity. And many intelligent and well-informed people (one’s ‘epistemic peers’) think that this principle applies in war too. So, even if we are ultimately persuaded that the orthodox view is correct, we should accept that there is a non-negligible chance that we are wrong about this. This moral uncertainty is enough to render the military a morally risky profession. As long as there is a decent chance that the revisionist view is correct, there is a decent chance that participating in unjustified military operations will involve serious personal wrongdoing.¹⁴

4. The Wrong of Moral Risk Exposure

The mere fact that the military is a morally risky profession neither entails that military recruitment policies stand in need of special justification, nor provides grounds for evaluating specific recruitment practices. These require an additional step in the argument: that persons have a presumptive claim against being exposed to moral risk. This claim grounds negative duties to avoid increasing the probability that others will engage in serious wrongdoing, as well as positive duties to reduce this probability. Moreover, these duties are more stringent with respect to persons to whom we have independent duties to protect and support.

To illustrate the basic idea, consider two simple examples:

Lift: Carl is angry at Boss for firing him. He asks his friend Tony to give him a lift to Boss’s house. Tony suspects that Carl will lose his temper and beat up Boss.

Music: Carl is angry at Boss for firing him and drives to Boss’s house. His friend Tony is in the passenger seat and suspects that Carl will lose his temper and beat up Boss. Tony

¹² See Dannenbaum (2018:40-49) and Strawser (forthcoming).

¹³ For a classic statement, see Walzer (2006).

¹⁴ Strawser (forthcoming) offers a more detailed version of this argument. For analogous arguments in a different context, see Moller (2011).

can play some soothing music on the car stereo which will calm Carl down.

Our claim is that Tony has a (pro tanto) duty, *owed to Carl*, to reduce the probability that Carl wrongfully assaults Boss, either by refraining from helping him to assault Boss (*Life*), or by preventing him from doing so (*Music*).

What is the source of these duties? Drawing on existing work, we make two complementary proposals. First, according to *interest-based* views, persons have claims to not be exposed to moral risk because committing serious wrongs is bad for the wrongdoer.¹⁵ To clarify: the claim here is not that acting wrongly is bad for a person insofar as it causes other bads, such as feelings of guilt and remorse, or punishment and social sanction. Rather, the idea is that committing a serious wrong itself sets back a person's interests.

There are two ways to interpret the interest-based view. On one version, wrongdoing is a negative component of wellbeing.¹⁶ Acting wrongly diminishes a person's prospects for leading a prudentially good or flourishing life. Though this view might seem unorthodox, it is worth noting that it is compatible with a fairly wide range of theories of wellbeing. Most obviously, it seems at home within 'objective list' theories of wellbeing. These theories hold that a person's wellbeing is determined by whether their life contains certain goods, such as achievements, valuable relationships, and knowledge. Alongside these items, we might add avoiding serious wrongdoing to the list. But the idea that wrongdoing is a negative component of wellbeing is also compatible with 'desire-satisfaction' views. These hold, very roughly, that wellbeing consists in getting what one wants (or would want, under certain conditions). Since it seems plausible that most people have a strong desire to avoid committing serious wrongs – such as unjustified killing and injuring – it follows that their wellbeing is diminished by so acting. The only theories which rule out the possibility that wrongdoing is a negative component of wellbeing are thoroughgoing subjectivist views, which hold that only negatively-valenced experiences can diminish wellbeing (and so wrongdoing is only prudentially bad insofar as it causes such experiences).

But even if one rejects the idea that wrongdoing is a negative component of wellbeing, this need not undermine the interest-based view. It can be understood in a second way, which distinguishes between our reasons to promote a person's wellbeing and our reasons to act 'for their sake' in some broader sense. On this view, persons' interests outstrip their wellbeing.¹⁷ Hence, acting wrongly sets back persons' interests in leading a life free of wrongdoing, even if it does not affect their wellbeing.

The core argument for the interest-based view appeals to judgements about trade-offs between avoiding wrongdoing and avoiding other kinds of cost. Consider the kind of trade-offs you would prefer for yourself in the following case:

¹⁵ Brownlee (2019), Tadros (2020, 2016b), and Munch (2022).

¹⁶ Brownlee (2019).

¹⁷ Tadros (2020).

Revelation: You wake up from unconsciousness. Your memory of last night's events is hazy. You know that somebody was wrongfully assaulted and injured. But you do not know if you were assaulted or if you committed the assault. You will shortly be given a tonic, that will restore last night's memories for 30 seconds, before you permanently forget what happened.¹⁸

Would you hope to discover that you were the victim of the assault or the perpetrator? We find it very intuitive that, for some level of physical injury, we would strongly prefer the former over the latter. This outcome would be better *for us*. This is not explained by our interest in avoiding negative feelings of guilt, but rather by our interest in not committing wrongs. The intuition persists when it comes to making trade-offs on behalf of others, especially those that we have special duties to care for, such as our children. For some level of cost, we would strongly prefer, for their sake, that our child suffer that cost, rather than commit a serious moral wrong.

Alongside an interest-based view, there is a second kind of argument for these duties. On this alternative view, our duties not to expose others to moral risk are grounded in our reasons to *respect* persons' moral capacities.¹⁹ A person's moral capacities include her ability to appreciate morally relevant reasons, evaluate her actions in light of those reasons, and conform her actions to those reasons.²⁰ Respect for those capacities demands (at minimum) that we do not set back a person's success at acting in accordance with morality. We wrong a person when we, as Jeff Howard puts it, 'subvert' the proper function of these capacities, by increasing the probability that they will act wrongly. In addition, respect for a person's moral capacities may require that we take steps to help her avoid acting wrongly, such as by maintaining an environment that enables her to better develop and exercise those capacities.

For our purposes, we need not adjudicate between the interest-based and respect-based explanations of our duties not to expose others to moral risk. Both deliver similar results in cases like *Lift* and *Music*. Moreover, these views are not exclusive. Exposing persons to moral risk is plausibly objectionable for *both* interest and respect-based reasons.

One further point of clarification is in order. On our view, the duty to help others avoid committing serious wrongs extends to cases of *non-culpable* wrongdoing. To see this, consider variations on our earlier cases:

Revelation 2: The same as in *Revelation*, except that you know that the assault was entirely permissible relative to the perpetrator's evidence, even though the assault was objectively wrongful. (Imagine that the perpetrator's evidence strongly indicated that the victim was about to kill several innocent people, and that assaulting the victim was the only way to prevent this. In fact, the victim was entirely innocent.)

Music 2: The same as *Lift*, except that Carl is fully justified in believing that assaulting

¹⁸ From Tadros (2020:231-232).

¹⁹ Howard (2016).

²⁰ Howard takes these capacities to be similar to what Rawls describes as persons' 'first moral power' (Rawls, 2005:19).

Boss is morally justified. (Imagine that Carl's evidence strongly indicates that beating up Boss is the only way to prevent Boss from killing several innocent people. In fact, Boss is entirely innocent). Tony (who is aware of the facts) can play soothing music that will calm Carl down and prevent him from carrying out the (fully excused) assault.

Our judgements match those in the original cases. In *Revelation 2* we would strongly prefer – for our own sake – to discover that we were the victim, rather than the perpetrator, of a wrongful (but fully excused) assault. Similarly, in *Music 2* we find it intuitive that Tony owes it to Carl to prevent Carl from (fully excusably) assaulting Boss.

5. Varieties of Moral Risk Imposition

We have argued that we owe it to persons not to expose them to moral risk. But what is the precise content of this duty? In what ways can we expose others to moral risk, either intentionally or unintentionally? We think there are (at least) five broad mechanisms.

1. *Situational*: This involves simply placing someone in an environment where there are more background opportunities to engage in wrongdoing.

2. *Practical*: This involves giving people new practical reasons to act wrongly. Two obvious examples are incentivisation (“Help me rob the bank and I’ll give you half the loot”) or coercion (“Help me rob the bank or I’ll post intimate photos of you online”).²¹

3. *Epistemic*: This involves causing others to form false beliefs that increase their likelihood of wrongdoing. This might involve inducing ignorance of morally-relevant non-moral facts (e.g. telling somebody that factory farming does not inflict pain on animals, thereby influencing their decision to purchase factory-farmed meat). Or it may involve inducing ignorance of relevant moral facts (e.g. telling somebody that animals lack moral status and so animal pain is not morally significant, thereby influencing their decision to purchase factory-farmed meat).²² Jeff Howard suggests that ‘epistemic subversion’ can also take place when someone is misled about the *role* that morality ought to play in decision-making, such as where someone is led to assign disproportionate weight to non-moral reasons, such as self-interest (e.g. telling somebody that their love for bacon is sufficient to overcome their moral qualms about eating factory-farmed pigs).²³

4. *Deliberative*: This involves increasing someone’s likelihood of wrongdoing by inhibiting their deliberative abilities. Unlike epistemic forms of moral risk imposition – which shape a person’s *evidence* – the deliberative type involves impacting a person’s capacities to rationally govern their conduct. This involves interfering with a person’s ability to reason successfully about right and wrong in light of their evidence and to regulate their conduct in accordance with their conclusions.²⁴ On the former, for example, a person’s ability to engage in moral reasoning may be inhibited as a result of a restrictive education that failed to expose them to a diversity of

²¹ Howard (2016:31).

²² Howard (2016:42).

²³ Howard (2016:31).

²⁴ Howard (2016:29).

reasonable opinions on moral matters, thereby depriving them of the opportunity to practise critical moral reflection. In terms of the latter, someone may have their confidence in their ability to make moral judgements systematically undermined, or have been trained to suppress their moral qualms and follow authority.

5. *Distributive*: The duty not to expose others to moral risk also has an important distributive dimension. A person's exposure to moral risk is not only affected by changes in their *circumstances* (via the four mechanisms outlined above), but also by *patterns* of moral risk distribution within a population. In one kind of case, moral risks might be concentrated on a subset of the population. For example, government policies that lead to economic deprivation in certain areas can have predictable criminogenic effects on the (disproportionately young and male) residents of those areas, thereby increasing their opportunities and incentives for wrongdoing.²⁵ In another kind of case, a morally risky task might be distributed towards persons who are at a disadvantage in terms of avoiding wrongdoing. For example, a politician might deliberately make asylum criteria vague, so that inexperienced junior immigration staff are left to engage in morally risky decision-making instead. In fact, in cases like this, those subjected to moral risk may have two distinct complaints. Not only do they bear *more* moral risk (in virtue of their vulnerability), but others benefit from the moral burden being shifted onto the vulnerable party. As Michael Robillard and BJ Strawser have recently argued, this can be understood as a distinctive form of exploitation, which they call *moral exploitation*.²⁶

6. Military Recruitment Practices as Drivers of Moral Risk

With the preceding elements in place, we can now illustrate how our moral risk framework can be used to evaluate military recruitment practices. To do so, we take a critical look at recruitment as practised in the UK.

6.1 Targeting young persons from deprived backgrounds

The UK is an international outlier in terms of its age of recruitment. Young people can serve from their sixteenth birthday and may sign up five months in advance of that date. No member of the EU recruits this young, and the UK is the only permanent member of NATO to do so. But the UK is distinctive not only for its low age threshold, but also for the *proportion* of military personnel who are recruited young. Both the US and France recruit from the age of 17. But only 6% and 3% of their armed forces enlist as minors, respectively.²⁷ By contrast, 23% of British Armed Forces recruits in the 2021/2022 intake signed up before their 18th birthday (rising to 30% for the army).²⁸ Despite criticism from children's rights organisations, political commentators, and (some) political parties, there are few signs of reform, with some in government calling for increased efforts to recruit young people to fill shortfalls.²⁹

²⁵ This example drives Tadros's (2020) argument that the distribution of responsibility for wrongdoing is a matter of distributive justice, and Howard's (2016) argument that criminogenic policies inflict the wrong of entrapment on citizens.

²⁶ Robillard and Strawser (2022).

²⁷ Gee and Taylor (2016:36).

²⁸ Ministry of Defence (2022). The proportion of child recruits is even higher for infantry sections of the army.

²⁹ This article takes its title from a 2017 government report by Mark Francois MP (Francois, 2017). The report makes a number of recommendations aimed at increasing recruitment, including making the Armed Forces a topic on the National Curriculum (p.9), increasing cadet forces nationwide so that more young people experience a military ethos (p.10), and stepping up recruitment efforts within cadet forces ("within the legal constraints") (p.10).

Alongside the youthfulness of its intake, the UK military focuses its recruitment in areas of socioeconomic deprivation.³⁰ In particular, those recruited as minors are disproportionately enlisted from these areas.³¹ As a result, many recruits come from a background of low educational achievement. For example, three-quarters of junior recruits assessed in 2015 had a reading age of 11 or below (with some as low as 5).³²

Since the military profession presents opportunities for serious wrongdoing, all forms of military recruitment involve the situational variety of moral risk imposition. However, the demographic profile of British recruits elevates this situational moral risk. One key reason is that minors are more likely to be directed into combat roles, compared to those who join as adults.³³ Alongside the increased non-moral risk (such as being injured or traumatised), these roles are additionally morally risky, since combat operations are a key locus of wrongdoing in *ad bellum* unjust military operations. Moreover, combat roles involve making difficult ‘on the ground’ decisions, and so have some of the highest levels of moral risk attached (e.g. having to make split-second decisions about whether to treat an approaching person as a civilian or enemy combatant.)

In addition, young people are less equipped for moral decision-making. Their brains are still in a process of development that continues until roughly age 25 (with male brains taking approximately 2 years longer to develop than female brains).³⁴ In particular, the pre-frontal cortex – the area of the brain responsible for long-term planning, assessing risk, regulating emotion, and controlling impulsive behaviour – undergoes significant developments for a decade after the age at which British children can apply to join the army.³⁵ This unfinished process of neural, cognitive, and psychological development “leaves some adolescents particularly susceptible to making ill-judged decisions”.³⁶

Alongside these factors, there is reason to think that socioeconomic disadvantage exacerbates recruits’ exposure to moral risk. There is some evidence that heightened stress and adversity in childhood has developmental effects which render individuals more likely to make important decisions (such as the decision to join the military) based on “emotive appeal rather than rational evaluation.”³⁷ Rates of childhood adversity are high among members of the UK military, especially members of infantry and combat units. One major study found that among male military personnel as a whole, 37.5% reported being in trouble with the police, 29.8% reported being shouted at a lot at home, 25.5% reported often having been in fights at school, 17.9% had been suspended or expelled from school, and 3.3% had spent time in local authority care.³⁸ This

³⁰ Oxford Economics (2021:34).

³¹ One study of enlisted minors found that recruitment was 57% higher in the poorest fifth of constituencies compared to the wealthiest fifth (Child Rights International Network, 2019).

³² Child Soldiers International (2019:26).

³³ Child Soldiers International (2019:4).

³⁴ Medact (2016:7-8), Arain et al. (2013), Johnson et al (2009).

³⁵ Medact (2016), Johnson et al (2009), Steinberg (2008).

³⁶ Medact (2016:14).

³⁷ Child Rights International Network (2019:13). See also, Medact (2016). For summaries of the evidence, see e.g. Kishiyama et al (2009), Hackman and Farah (2009), Moriguchi and Shinohara (2019).

³⁸ Iverson et al (2007).

adversity was concentrated among personnel who were young, in the army, and of lower ranks.³⁹ Insofar as adversity-related effects on decision-making increase one's exposure to moral risk, there is reason to think that targeting recruitment among young people from backgrounds of socioeconomic deprivation involves selecting individuals who are less equipped to avoid moral risk.

More generally, there is evidence that economic deprivation imposes a 'mental bandwidth' tax on the disadvantaged, in which the need to attend to constant short-term crises depletes one's stock of cognitive resources to devote to other things. This has significant effects on both cognition and self-control.⁴⁰ Insofar as cognition and self-control are relevant to a person's moral decision-making, recruiting from areas of socioeconomic deprivation involves selecting individuals subject to an externally-imposed disadvantage in terms of avoiding moral risk.

Educational disadvantage also plausibly correlates with a moral-risk disadvantage. For one thing, low educational attainment places an additional barrier to accessing relevant information for assessing the moral riskiness of the military profession. Put crudely: if a recruit cannot read, it will be much harder for them to assess their employer's moral track record. In addition, there is some evidence that schools in more deprived areas offer fewer opportunities to practise critical reflection. For example, Harris and Williams (2012) found that teachers in affluent schools ask more open questions and wait longer for children to respond, evidence of (and contributing to) higher quality dialogue. Moreover, since military involvement in educational settings is concentrated on deprived areas, and since (as we argue below) this involvement exacerbates moral risk, there is a further reason to think that young people's socioeconomic disadvantage exacerbates moral risk.

6.2 Role of the military and arms industry in providing careers services, training and educational resources

The military has a growing presence in UK education. Over 500 schools already have Combined Cadet Forces (extra-curricular programmes run by the Ministry of Defence). The government invested an additional £50 million into expanding the programmes between 2015-2020⁴¹, and additional funding has been pledged to continue the expansion.⁴² Alongside the cadet programme, the military maintains an extensive programme of school visits and provides educational materials to schools. Military recruiters are often present at school careers events, and significant funding for STEM education and careers training comes from the military and military-related industries. There have also been calls from within government for British schools to promote a 'military ethos' and a patriotic curriculum.

³⁹ A study by Veterans for Peace (2017) estimates that British infantry recruits (who are younger and from more disadvantaged backgrounds) were 50% more likely to have experienced high levels of childhood adversity.

⁴⁰ Mullainathan and Shafir (2013).

⁴¹ Scott (2015).

⁴² Department for Education (2021).

We contend that involving the military (and military-related industries) in educational settings serves to occlude the moral riskiness of military (and military-related) professions. The integration of war-related work into more general careers training (e.g. a British Army stall at a careers fair) portrays this work as a job like any other. But as the House of Commons Defence Committee puts it, “The Armed Forces require a fundamentally different commitment from that required in any other sphere of activity”, referring explicitly to the fact that the military profession involves the risk of killing (and not just the risk of being killed).⁴³ The same point applies to sponsorship of educational and careers resources by arms manufacturers, which has been defended as a way of helping “inspire the next generation of engineers”.⁴⁴ This portrays arms engineering as just one more socially productive form of engineering, ignoring the distinctive moral riskiness of participating in the arms industry.

In the same vein, recruitment materials have faced criticism for giving a one-sided presentation of military careers, focussing on the benefits of joining the military (e.g. “travel and adventurous training” and working alongside “best mates”).⁴⁵ They do little to foster awareness of the physical, psychological, and moral risks involved.⁴⁶ The same is true of educational resources focused on the military. For example, mention of death or killing was absent from the ‘British Armed Forces Learning Resource’ sent by the Department for Education to all schools in 2014.⁴⁷ The resource has been accused of presenting a “sanitised” view of the experiences of armed forces personnel and of UK military history, glorifying military values and conveying a simplistic view of soldiers as heroes.⁴⁸ (At one point, the military ethos is described as “a golden thread that can be an example of what is best about our nation and helps it improve everything it touches.”)

Within our framework, these practices can be understood as varieties of epistemic moral risk exposure: they induce moral ignorance by emphasising non-moral factors (e.g. the purported benefits of military-related careers) whilst (at best) ignoring or (at worst) suppressing discussion of morally relevant factors (e.g. that the use of force presents opportunities for grave moral wrongdoing).

6.3 Cultivating patriotism in schools

Since 2014 schools in England have been required to promote ‘British values’ as part of their school ethos and across the curriculum.⁴⁹ Whilst the original policy motivations focussed on promoting ‘muscular liberalism’ and countering extremism, schools have often interpreted the policy as encouraging patriotism, seeking to fulfil the statutory requirement by (for example) holding events celebrating the Royal Family and eating ‘British foods’ such as fish and chips.⁵⁰

⁴³ House of Commons Defence Committee (2005:28).

⁴⁴ Doward (2018).

⁴⁵ Ministry of Defence (N.Da)

⁴⁶ Louise and Sangster (2019).

⁴⁷ Promoted by the Department for Education under the curriculum category of ‘Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development’ (Gov.uk: 2014). The Department website no longer hosts this resource.

⁴⁸ ForcesWatch (2015).

⁴⁹ Department for Education (2014).

⁵⁰ Easton (2022)

Recently, there have been renewed calls for more patriotism in schools. In June 2021, the government endorsed ‘One Britain One Nation Day’, encouraging school children to sing a patriotic anthem.⁵¹ In 2022, the (then) Education Secretary Nadhim Zahawi suggested that, “overall I would like patriotism to be promoted in our schools unashamedly. The goal should be for our young people to be proud to be British and that on the whole we are a force of good.”⁵² In celebration of the Queen’s Platinum Jubilee in 2022, the Department for Education spent £12 million delivering a book to all schools aiming to inspire patriotism and give children a shared sense of Britain’s collective history.⁵³

These activities all seek to encourage love of one’s country amongst students. But love can be dangerous. In the case of love of country, a lack of “critical distance” can cloud our political and moral judgements about the state’s activities.⁵⁴ Increased patriotism thus risks making it harder for young people to subject their state to critical scrutiny, and to accurately assess the justification for particular military operations. This in turn makes it harder to assess the moral risks of joining the military. Instilling patriotism therefore manifests the first form of deliberative moral risk imposition described above, whereby one’s abilities to engage in moral reasoning are inhibited.

The second form of deliberative moral risk imposition is also relevant here. Love can cause us to give the interests of our loved one disproportionate weight in our decision-making, as when a parent wrongly prioritises their own child’s interests, even when they know they ought not to. So, even if a patriot successfully evaluates their state’s moral credentials, their patriotism might prevent them from responding appropriately to their assessment.

Encouraging patriotism via education is also morally risky in the epistemic sense. Since a good deal of British history makes Britain “distinctly unlovable to someone possessed of an effective sense of justice”⁵⁵, the aim of increasing love of country in students requires a degree of epistemic subversion: either imparting falsehoods, twisting the truth, or (at best) ignoring certain historical facts. In recent years, there has been growing support from British politicians for a teaching emphasis on the positive elements of British history, such as (in Nadhim Zahawi’s words) the “benefits of the British Empire”.⁵⁶ But inspiring national pride by teaching, in the words of former education secretary Michael Gove “the proper narrative of British history”⁵⁷ (in contrast to ‘improper’ narratives “trashing...our past”⁵⁸) requires downplaying the incidence and significance of state injustice.⁵⁹ This conflicts with equipping young citizens to avoid moral risk. As Michelle Moody-Adams puts it, “comprehensive historical understanding is ... a central

⁵¹ Woolcock, Grylls and Ellery (2021).

⁵² Davis (2022).

⁵³ Booth (2021).

⁵⁴ Hand (2011:29).

⁵⁵ Brighouse (2006:111),

⁵⁶ Quoted in Davis (2022).

⁵⁷ Speech at the 2009 Conservative Party Conference. Quoted in Hand (2011:8)

⁵⁸ Speech at the 2010 Conservative Party Conference. Quoted in Wozniak (2010).

⁵⁹ On the recent “history wars” in the UK, see Watson (2020).

element of the information we need to be responsible moral agents.”⁶⁰

6.4 Push for a ‘military ethos’ in schools

In 2012, the UK government launched an initiative to promote a ‘military ethos’ in schools, citing the values of “loyalty, resilience, courage and teamwork” that the military embody.⁶¹ The primary focus has been on expanding the Combined Cadet Forces, especially in disadvantaged areas. Targets for 500 new units were met and a new round of funding was announced in 2021 with a target of reaching 60,000 cadets.⁶² Other programmes introduced under the ‘military ethos’ umbrella include ‘Troops to Teachers’ (designed to fast-track ex-military personnel into teaching positions⁶³), as well as schemes led by former armed forces members to tackle student underachievement, with activities ranging from one-to-one mentoring to military-style obstacle courses.⁶⁴

‘Military ethos’ projects in schools have been praised for instilling “discipline” and reducing “negative behaviours”.⁶⁵ But whilst the virtues of obedience and deference to authority can be valuable in some respects, they are uncondusive to producing citizens capable of subjecting authorities to critical scrutiny. A student schooled under this ‘military ethos’ has fewer opportunities to engage in independent moral reflection, particularly regarding the military profession. Moreover, a culture of obedience and deference makes it harder for young people to act on the moral conclusions that they do draw. Promoting a ‘military ethos’ is thus another example of the deliberative form of moral risk imposition.

6.5 Push to celebrate and revere the military in wider society

UK recruitment takes place within a broader political culture in which celebration of, and reverence for, the military is increasingly associated with good citizenship. Despite the public generally having high regard for the armed forces⁶⁶, the last two decades have seen significant political efforts to encourage greater support for the military.⁶⁷

National public events concerning the military have traditionally centred on Remembrance Day. But since 2009 this has been supplemented with a rebranded Armed Forces Day. Armed Forces Day is justified as providing a morale boost for the Armed Forces community, as well as promoting civil-military integration.⁶⁸ The celebrations (described by one researcher as a “de

⁶⁰ Moody-Adams (2022).

⁶¹ ForcesWatch (2012). References to “loyalty” have been removed from the updated Department for Education webpage (Department for Education, 2013a).

⁶² Department for Education (2021).

⁶³ Department for Education (2013b).

⁶⁴ Department for Education (2013a).

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Dixon (2018:25-31).

⁶⁷ For an overview, see Dixon (2018) and Danilova (2015). Many of these initiatives can be traced to recommendations in the Report of Inquiry into National Recognition of our Armed Forces (2008) and the Report of the Task Force on the Military Covenant (2010).

⁶⁸ For illustrative statements of these aims, see the Armed Forces Day website (Ministry of Defence, N.Db.) and the website of the Armed Forces Major Events Team North East Lincolnshire (Armed Forces Major Events Team, N.D)

facto military recruitment fair”⁶⁹) include events such as parades, flying displays, and other “capability demonstrations”⁷⁰. The focus is exclusively on the positives of the military, leading to charges of glorifying war.⁷¹

Remembrance Day has also undergone notable changes. What began as a day for solemn reflection on lives lost in the First World War and the importance of peace, has expanded towards showing support for soldiers involved in all British operations. Remembrance Day activities and associated paraphernalia (most notably, the famous Red Poppy) are dominated by the Royal British Legion, according to whom remembrance “honours those who serve”.⁷² The implicit message is that this honour is given unconditionally, regardless of whether the wars fought in were justified or fought justly.

In line with our earlier discussion, our view is that increasing public focus on the military’s successes and virtues – whilst ignoring its moral failings and vices – results in an epistemically morally risky picture of the military, which radically underestimates the moral risks associated with military service.⁷³

In addition, we contend that the push to celebrate and revere the military has created another source of moral risk, by discouraging and delegitimising moral criticism of the military. For example, failing to join in with Remembrance celebrations (or indeed, participating in alternative ways such as by wearing a white poppy) is increasingly cast as ungrateful and unpatriotic.⁷⁴ The vilification of those who do not wear a red poppy (especially public figures) has become common (spawning the term “poppy fascism” to describe the phenomenon).⁷⁵

A similar phenomenon can be detected in political and public discourse surrounding the creation of the Armed Forces Covenant in 2010. This legislation affirms a moral obligation to support the armed forces, and (since 2021) imposes statutory obligations on certain public bodies to pay ‘due regard’ to the interests of members of the armed forces and their families. A key part of the political rhetoric surrounding the introduction, and continuation, of the Covenant is that the military are, in some sense, under threat from a hostile and unsupportive public, that requires moral correction.⁷⁶

A more extreme variant on these sentiments was present in the political debate surrounding the Overseas Operations (Service Personnel and Veterans) Act 2021. The Act imposes new limits on bringing legal claims against members of the military for actions overseas. The original Bill proposed a five-year time limit on prosecuting members of the armed forces for international crimes committed abroad, but was subsequently watered down (as critics pointed out, the Bill came close to proposing a de facto amnesty for war crimes). But a key rallying point for

⁶⁹ Danilova (2015:92).

⁷⁰ Armed Forces Major Events Team (N.D.).

⁷¹ Danilova (2015:92)

⁷² This supports the common criticism that Remembrance Day has become less about remembrance and more about showing support for current military (e.g. ForcesWatch (2015:9)).

⁷³ For a general discussion of the ethics of states’ use of symbolism and non-rational persuasion, see Tsai (2016).

⁷⁴ E.g. Shiner (2018).

⁷⁵ Hall (2017) and English (2017). For a philosophical account, see Archer and Matheson (2022).

⁷⁶ On political efforts to construct this perception of threat, see Dixon (2018).

defenders of the Bill was that allegations against British troops (including unlawful killings and torture) were largely vexatious claims brought by those with a political axe to grind. As then-Prime Minister Teresa May MP proclaimed, “We will never again in any future conflict let those activist left-wing human rights lawyers harangue and harass the bravest of the brave, the men and women of our armed forces.”⁷⁷ On this telling, soldiers require protection from the weaponisation of moral and legal norms by bad actors.

This combination of vilification and credibility-denial has a chilling effect on moral debate and deliberation about decisions to go to war and conduct in war. When dissent and criticism are recast as disrespectful and bad-faith, it becomes harder for persons to think clearly about the rights and wrongs of military actions, and hence about the moral riskiness of the military profession.⁷⁸

6.6 Pervasiveness of ‘just war myths’

Finally, we contend that commonly accepted ethical norms regarding war are themselves a source of moral risk – in particular, the pervasiveness of the view that conduct in war is subject to radically different moral norms to those that apply in other domains. The most common manifestation of this view is the idea – reflected in orthodox just war theory – that killing (or helping to kill) in an unjust war does not involve personal moral wrongdoing. As we noted in Section 3, there are good reasons to doubt that this is true, and this doubtfulness accounts for a significant portion of the moral riskiness of the military profession. Hence, the fact that the orthodox view is accepted as the default or ‘common-sense’ view of the morality of participation in war is itself a significant source of epistemic moral risk. As James Christensen puts it:

By promulgating the view that it is permissible to fight regardless of a war’s moral status, we facilitate injustice. When we tell the young, impressionable individuals who comprise our armed forces that they can do no wrong, we invite them to forgo moral reflection.⁷⁹

6.7 Conclusion

Individually and collectively, the practices discussed above increase young people’s exposure to moral risk. Since there is a general duty to avoid exposing others to moral risk, we conclude that the British state presumptively wrongs its young people by subjecting them to these practices. Furthermore, since the state has a special duty of care that requires protecting and supporting its children and young people, it follows that the state’s duty to avoid exposing these citizens to additional moral risk is more stringent. It is typically a graver wrong to fail to fulfil one’s general duties to those who one owes special duties of care.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Speech at the 2016 Conservative Party Conference (The Independent, 2016).

⁷⁸ As Quakers in Britain put it in response to the Armed Forces Bill, “society needs the freedom to question British military policy without fear of censure.” (2021:3).

⁷⁹ Christensen (2020:190), drawing on McMahan (2009:6-7). We are reminded of Bernard Williams’s worry that moral philosophy risks “misleading people about matters of great importance” (1972:xvii).

⁸⁰ Gardner (2013).

Though our conclusion is specific to the UK context, our aim in discussing this case is to demonstrate a general approach to evaluating military recruitment in light of a concern for the creation and distribution of moral risk within a community, that can be applied to other contexts.

7. Are the Risks Compensated?

We now consider an important defence against our criticism. This response accepts that UK-style recruitment practices involve moral risk exposure, but argues that these practices are nonetheless justified in virtue of the *overall* benefits young people can expect from a military career. If recruitment practices are in young people's interests, then they need not be wronged by being exposed to the associated moral risk. We will consider two versions of this 'Compensation Defence'.

7.1 *The Prudential Compensation Defence*

The first defence, common in popular and political discourse, claims that exposing young people to the military profession is *prudentially* beneficial. Indeed, such benefits are often invoked to resist calls for reform (such as raising the minimum age of enlistment) on the grounds that this would deprive young people of a valuable opportunity.⁸¹ The most common arguments focus on social mobility: the military offers opportunities for acquiring education and training for underprivileged young people. Recent recruitment advertising emphasises the benefits of 'seeing the world' (or 'getting out') and making friends. The military also claims to improve recruits' health and to instil self-discipline (and other valuable traits). It is also sometimes claimed that a military career provides prudential moral benefits too. For example, that the military 'gets kids off the streets' who would otherwise be going down a path of crime and vice. There is thus a case to be made that recruits are compensated for the moral risks they are exposed to.

We offer three arguments against this version of the Compensation Defence.

7.1.1 *Unclear Benefits*

Our first response questions whether serving in the military is unambiguously beneficial for recruits. Although the military is often praised for offering people a "leg up"⁸², there is little evidence to support claims that military service contributes to social mobility (the military does not collect socioeconomic data on recruits).⁸³ Veterans are no more likely than non-veterans to be in work, and their jobs are more likely to be unskilled.⁸⁴ Re-employment rates are particularly low amongst those who have served in the infantry, with one study suggesting that 30% of infantry veterans who had left the army within four years of starting their training were not in work or education.⁸⁵

Rather than 'rescuing' young people from unemployment, for most recruits joining the military amounts to the end of their full-time education. The level of education provided for youth

⁸¹ See, for example, Penny Mordaunt's MP (2016) (then Minister of State for the Armed Forces) response to Child Soldiers International.

⁸² For example, the military is described as a "vehicle for social mobility" (Ministry of Defence, 2017).

⁸³ ForcesWatch (2017).

⁸⁴ Child Soldiers International (2019:2).

⁸⁵ Fossey and Hughes (2013: 9).

recruits is significantly below high school standards (inspection standards for military education providers – unlike schools – exclude quality of education).⁸⁶ Unlike in the US, there is no supported pipeline into higher education for ex-service personnel, and veterans are 10% less likely to have a degree than non-veteran members of the UK population.⁸⁷

It's plausible that the health of recruits is better than the general population during their term of service. However, long-term health can be impacted by injuries sustained during service, and overall health is often negatively impacted by poor mental health.⁸⁸ Veterans are much more likely to experience common mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety, than those in the general population, and are almost twice as likely to experience alcohol problems.⁸⁹

Lastly, it is unclear that a military career benefits recruits by removing them from criminogenic environments.⁹⁰ Military personnel are more likely than their civilian peers to commit violent, sexual, and drug-related offences.⁹¹ Although only approximately 3% of those in British prisons are ex-service personnel,⁹² veterans are overrepresented in the prison population for violent and sexual crimes.⁹³

However, it is admittedly difficult to assess the extent to which negative outcomes for veterans can be attributed to having served in the military, since military recruitment selects for those who are already at higher risk of negative life outcomes.⁹⁴ But, at the very least, the case for the prudential benefits of a military career remains to be shown. Moreover, as we argue below, the Compensation Defence fails *even if* the prudential benefits obtain.

7.1.2 *Gratuitous Risk*

Our second response targets a key assumption behind the Compensation Defence. The assumption is that exposing a person to (a risk of) harm is justified simply if the (expected) benefit to that person is greater than the (expected) harm. But this is not true. To justify a harmful action by appealing to the benefits to the person harmed, the harm must also be *necessary* to providing the benefit (i.e. there must be no feasible way of providing the benefit without the harm). To illustrate, consider a simple example:

Smoothie: Angie is deficient in Vitamin C and drinking orange juice will give her 10 units of benefit. However, she is allergic to apples and drinking apple juice will give her 2 units of harm. Billy makes Angie an orange and apple smoothie, which Angie drinks.

⁸⁶ Child Soldiers International (2019:2).

⁸⁷ Hatfield (2020).

⁸⁸ Oster et al. (2017).

⁸⁹ Community Innovations Enterprise (2015).

⁹⁰ One Home Office-commissioned review of interventions to prevent gang involvement, youth violence and crime is sceptical about the efficacy of military-style intervention programs (O'Connor and Waddell, 2015).

⁹¹ MacManus et al. (2013).

⁹² Ministry of Justice (2021). Other estimates are higher (Gee, 2007:131; Howard League for Penal Reform (2011)).

⁹³ Howard League for Penal Reform (2011).

⁹⁴ The problem of selection effects is widely-acknowledged in the literature on veteran outcomes (e.g. MacLean and Elder, 2007). MacManus et al (2012) report that rates of violence among veterans remain strongly associated with combat and trauma, controlling for pre-enlistment anti-social behavior and other sociodemographic factors.

Here Billy gives Angie a net benefit. Does this justify providing the smoothie? This crucially depends on whether Billy had the option of providing the benefit *without the harm*. If Billy could have given Angie a glass of orange juice *sans* apple, the fact that the benefits of the orange juice outweigh the harm of the apple is insufficient to justify the harm. Billy cannot defend giving Angie the smoothie by saying “What are you complaining about? You are amply compensated for your allergic reaction!” Billy wrongs Angie because the harm is *gratuitous*, even if it is outweighed.

Let’s apply this point to the Compensation Defence. The upshot is that even if the empirical claims made on behalf of military recruitment are true (that the opportunity for military service is overall beneficial to young people), it does not follow that the exposure to moral risk is justified. It also needs to be shown that the risk is necessary for providing the benefits: that there is no feasible way of supplying the benefit at lower risk. But it is implausible that there are no feasible reforms to recruitment practices that would reduce moral risk without jeopardizing the benefits.

7.1.3 Irrelevant Baselines

Our third response focuses on the *source* of the putative prudential benefits of a military career. The Compensation Defence typically focuses on advantages of military service *relative to a baseline of social deprivation and lack of opportunity* (such as poverty, poor education, and lack of social mobility). The military is billed as a good option for young people because it provides a ‘way out’ of these circumstances.

However, two further factors pose a problem for the Compensation Defence. The first is that the background social deprivation obtains (at least partly) as a result of distributive and social injustice. The second is that the state bears some responsibility for this unjust deprivation, either by contributing to it or failing to remedy it. This should not be particularly controversial. It is hard to deny that the social deprivation present in areas targeted for military recruitment is (at least partly) attributable to policy failures.

Crucially, the fact that the state bears responsibility for the unjust deprivation that (purportedly) renders military recruitment beneficial for young people (despite the moral risk) undermines the state’s ability to invoke the Compensation Defence. The state cannot claim to have discharged its duty of care to young people by appealing to the benefits of giving young people a risk-imposing opportunity, *if it is culpably sustaining the background conditions that make that opportunity beneficial*. To discharge its duty of care, the state must first fulfil its obligations to address the background deprivation. Justifications cannot be derived from one’s own ongoing moral failures.⁹⁵ The relevant baseline for judging whether a state-provided option counts as overall beneficial to a person is how well off that person would be *if the state fulfilled its obligations to combat distributive and social injustice*. And once we make the morally appropriate comparison, a significant proportion of the ‘benefits’ of military service are rendered ineligible for the Compensation Defence.

⁹⁵ Our objection here is similar to Cohen’s (1992) well-known ‘inter-personal test’ for the validity of moral justifications.

7.2 *The Moral Compensation Defence*

We now consider a second version of the Compensation Defence. It points out that alongside the moral risk of committing serious wrongs, military personnel also have a chance of contributing to significant moral goods (such as justified humanitarian interventions, peacekeeping operations, aid delivery, rescues, and maintaining valuable deterrence). This expectation of doing good outweighs the moral risk that recruits are exposed to via recruitment practices, and so recruits are not wronged by being subjected to those practices.

One way to defend this moral version of the Compensation Defence is via an argument for the permissibility of individuals *joining* the military. One might argue that if a state is justified in having its current military, relative to having no military, then its military institutions must be expected to overall do more good than bad. If having a military is justified in this ‘minimal’ sense, then it plausibly follows that would-be recruits can expect to do more good than bad by participating in that military. So, as long as a state is not morally required to abolish its military, individuals are morally justified in enlisting.⁹⁶ The Compensation Defence can be derived by adding one further step to this argument: the same expectation of doing overall good that renders it permissible for individuals to join a military, also renders it unobjectionable to induce individuals to join that military via morally risky military recruitment practices.

We offer three responses, which mirror our responses to the prudential version of the Compensation Defence.

First, it is not obvious that military institutions typically satisfy the minimal justification test. Ned Dobos has recently argued at length that we tend to radically underestimate the moral costs of having standing militaries, and that the majority of states’ military institutions are likely to do more bad than good. So, if one wants to employ the moral Compensation Defence to justify specific state recruitment practices – like those of the UK – one will need to make a compelling case that the UK military is minimally justified.

Second, even if we grant that a state’s military is minimally justified, the moral Compensation Defence runs into the same gratuitous risk problem discussed earlier. The mere fact that the overall moral benefits of joining the military outweighs the moral risk does not make it permissible to expose a person to that risk, *if the risk imposer could feasibly have mitigated the risk*. As we pointed out, it seems implausible that states like the UK could not maintain an effective military via a less morally risky suite of recruitment practices.

To give one example, research indicates that the practice of recruiting minors may in fact be *detrimental* to maintaining capable military personnel.⁹⁷ Analysis by Gee and Taylor (2016) suggests that a transition to a ‘Straight 18’ recruitment model is economically feasible, and the Ministry of Defence has not provided evidence to the contrary (despite requests from the House

⁹⁶ This argument is drawn from Lazar (2016).

⁹⁷ Gee and Taylor (2016). One reason is that younger recruits are more likely to drop out before completing their training. Amongst some youth cohorts, nearly half drop out within four years (National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, 2012). Moreover, it is very expensive to recruit under 18s. One analysis of the 2013-2014 recruitment intake estimates that it cost an additional £50 million per cycle to recruit junior soldiers, rather than an all-adult intake (ForcesWatch, 2014). See also, Child Soldiers International (2019).

of Commons Defence Committee to investigate the feasibility of raising the recruitment age).⁹⁸ Since other countries manage to fill their ranks without recruiting minors, we find it implausible that alternative means of recruitment could not achieve the desired results. In any case, it is very implausible that *every* morally risky element of UK recruitment we have identified could not feasibly be reformed.

Third, there is an additional form of gratuitous moral risk in play. Just as states typically have the option of reforming their recruitment policies to reduce their morally riskiness, states are also typically able to reform their military institutions and policies in ways that will lower the risk of military wrongdoing. Even if a state's current military institutions are minimally justified, compared to having no military at all, it is very unlikely that those institutions are as good *as they could feasibly be*, in terms of avoiding wrongdoing. When states fail to take reasonable steps to reduce the risk of military wrongdoing, they impose gratuitous moral risk on their military personnel. Military personnel are thereby wronged, even if they can expect to do more overall moral good than bad by joining the military.

These problems of gratuitous risk highlight that even if individuals are justified in joining the military (in virtue of their expectation of doing more good than bad), it doesn't follow that those recruits are not wronged by recruitment. Recruits and recruiters have different option sets. Recruits do not have the option of reducing the moral risks associated with their state's recruitment practices and military institutions. Since they lack this option, their decision to enlist may be morally optimal for them, despite the moral risk. But states typically do have these additional, risk-reducing options. So, recruitment can be morally suboptimal for the recruiter, even if enlistment is morally optimal for the recruit.

8. Conclusion

Our central contention is that a theory of just recruitment should incorporate a concern for moral risk. Alongside the duty to avoid exposing others to risks of prosaic harms like death, injury, and psychological trauma, there are also presumptive duties to avoid exposing others to increased risks of committing serious wrongs. Recruitment practices should therefore be evaluated in terms of how they create and distribute moral risk within a community.

To illustrate this idea, we've argued that UK-style practices are deficient at the bar of just recruitment. These practices expose young people to excessive moral risk via a variety of mechanisms. Because this exposure is not justified by compensating benefits, the state wrongs its young people by subjecting them to these practices. Since the general mechanisms of moral risk exposure are not unique to the UK, our mode of evaluation is applicable to other contexts, and the implied avenues of reform will be relevant to other countries too.

Our framework adds further weight to the case – already pressed by activists, NGOs and human rights organisations – against recruiting amongst minors and targeting recruitment at disadvantaged individuals. But our argument also suggests some new areas that ought to be targeted for reform. We should be concerned not only with the *demographic* of those targeted for

⁹⁸ House of Commons Defence Committee (2005:42-43).

recruitment, but also the *wider context* in which recruitment takes place. This speaks against militarisation in wider society and against the promotion of uncritical patriotism. In particular, it allows us to see that the stifling of critical discussion – especially about the moral assessment of military personnel and military missions – problematically contributes to the moral riskiness of military recruitment. Looking beyond recruitment, our approach calls for broader reforms of military institutions that would make the military profession less morally risky, ranging from government decision-making about the use of force to military training.⁹⁹

Finally, though we have argued that compensation alone cannot justify morally risky recruitment practices, our framework supports calls for providing military personnel with improved benefits. These might include funded schemes to encourage veterans' access to further education, and better pay and leaving packages.¹⁰⁰ Even if compensation does not eliminate or even lessen the injustice, it does at least provide some acknowledgement of the wrong that is being done. And it is morally important that the state recognise the price being paid by their current recruitment practices.

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⁹⁹ On the ethics of military training, see Dobos (2020) and Surber (2023).

¹⁰⁰ Though one might worry that material goods are incommensurable with the cost of taking on moral risk (Robillard and Strawser, 2022:200).

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