Mobilizing falsehoods

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I. INTRODUCTION

In July 1852, on the occasion of the American Independence Day celebration, the former slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass delivered a blistering attack on his contemporaries' continued toleration of slavery. In this celebrated speech, Douglass famously accused his contemporaries of failing to honor the ideals championed by the American "Founders":

> The signers of the Declaration of Independence [. . .] were great men [. . .] great enough to give fame to a great age. It does not often happen to a nation to raise, at one time, such a number of truly great men. [. . .] They were statesmen, patriots and heroes [. . .] With them, nothing was "*settled*" that was not right. With them, justice, liberty, and humanity were "*final*;" not slavery and oppression. You may well cherish the memory of such men. They were great in their day and generation. Their solid manhood stands out the more as we contrast it with these degenerate times. They seized upon eternal principles, and set a glorious example in their defense. Mark them! [But] [m]y business, if I have any here today, is with the present [. . .] I do not

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> hesitate to declare, with all my soul, that the character and conduct of this nation never looked blacker to me than on this Fourth of July! [. . .] America is false to the past [. . .][1]

Central to Douglass's denunciation, here, is the contrast between Americans' "glorious" past and their "degenerate" present. What is striking about this contrast, moreover, is that it relies on a clearly distorted and idealized picture of the past. It is evidently false that the Founders were paragons of virtue, for whom "justice, liberty, and humanity were '*final*'; not slavery and oppression." Indeed, the vast majority of them were—as Douglass well knew—slaveholders. Yet, Douglass's idealization serves a crucial rhetorical function. It helps construct a moral gulf between his contemporaries, on the one hand, and the Founders they revere, on the other. And, by doing so, it helps shame his contemporaries into taking action against slavery.[2]

Douglass's speech exemplifies an important rhetorical practice. Public speakers often use their speech to *mobilize* their audience—in other words, to motivate their audience to take action, collectively, in support of a political cause. Yet, in non-ideal circumstances, successfully mobilizing a group can be extremely difficult. This might be, for instance, because taking action is costly for potential participants (e.g., if protestors would face arrest or violent retaliation); because the odds of achieving political change are very low (e.g., if powerful decision-makers have insulated themselves from pressure); or simply because the mobilizer's audience is suffering from weakness of will. To overcome such obstacles to motivating people, mobilizers often resort to deploying *falsehoods*: that is, they put forward propositions that misrepresent reality.

Now, in practice, mobilizers frequently deploy falsehoods accidentally: they intend to say something true, but are mistaken, and therefore say something false instead. For instance, mobilizers who promulgate

1. Frederick Douglass, "What, to the Slave, is the Fourth of July," Rochester, New York, July 5, 1852, https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/speeches-african-american-history/1852-frederick-douglass-what-slave-fourth-july/.

2. For a detailed analysis of Douglass's speech, which supports this interpretation, see Kevin McClure, "Frederick Douglass' Use of Comparison in His Fourth of July Oration," *Western Journal of Communication* 64, no. 4 (2000): 425–44.

false conspiracy theories to motivate their audience (e.g., by claiming that climate change is a hoax) often believe these theories.[3] Yet, my focus will be on intentional falsehoods, where the speaker believes that the false proposition they are putting forward misrepresents reality. Thus, in the Douglass case, I am assuming, as seems very likely,[4] that Douglass believed that his declaration misrepresented the Founders' record on slavery. While accidental falsehoods *can* be morally problematic—particularly in situations where the speaker is culpable for their mistake—I consider intentional falsehoods to be prima facie more troubling, and therefore more difficult to defend, for reasons outlined in Section II.[5]

Note, furthermore, that mobilizing falsehoods can be communicated directly (e.g., by being stated or asserted) but also more indirectly (e.g., by means of conversational implicature). The defense of mobilizing falsehoods developed below is in principle meant to apply to both.[6] In practice, however, most of the cases I will examine involve falsehoods that are asserted or stated, which many consider to be more morally problematic than falsehoods that are merely implied.[7]

3. Quassim Cassam, *Conspiracy Theories* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), chap. 1–3.

4. McClure, "Oration," 428–32, observes that Douglass had previously criticized the Constitution, and the Founders who designed it, for being pro-slavery, and suggests that Douglass subsequently decided to portray them as anti-slavery for strategic reasons.

5. Accordingly, intentional falsehoods have attracted considerably more philosophical attention. In the extensive philosophical literature on lying, for example, lying is usually taken to involve saying something *one believes to be false*. See, e.g., Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 96; Don Fallis, "What Is Lying?," *Journal of Philosophy* 106, no. 1 (2009): 29–56; Thomas Carson, *Lying and Deception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 39; Jennifer Saul, *Lying, Misleading, and What Is Said* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3. Likewise, ethical explorations of misleading often focus on *intentional* misleading. See, e.g., ibid. at 71.

6. As Saul, ibid. at chap. 4, notes, the distinction between falsehoods that are stated or asserted, and falsehoods that are implicated, is often taken as a basis for distinguishing between *lying* and *merely misleading*. Since my defense is intended to apply to both asserted and implicated falsehoods, I refrain from framing it exclusively in terms of mobilizing *lies*.

7. E.g., Sam Berstler, "What's the Good of Language? On the Moral Distinction between Lying and Misleading," *Ethics* 130, no. 1 (2019): 5–31. Note that Williams, *Truthfulness*, 101, and Saul, *Lying*, chap. 4, have offered powerful grounds for doubting the moral significance of this distinction. But I prefer to sidestep this controversy by focusing predominantly, in practice, on examples of asserted falsehoods—which, to reiterate, many deem harder to justify.

The practice of deploying intentional mobilizing falsehoods—that is, of deliberately asserting or implying falsehoods to mobilize political action—is a common feature of real-world public discourse. For one thing, such falsehoods are widespread in the context of national narratives. As Douglass's speech illustrates, national stories are often rife with misrepresentations of past events and historical figures.[8] For example, by intentionally idealizing prominent national figures and characterizing them as exemplars of justice, speakers can tap into the motivational reservoir constituted by feelings of national belonging and direct it toward just causes.[9]

But the use of mobilizing falsehoods extends far beyond the case of national narratives. Indeed, public speakers often mobilize groups of people by intentionally disseminating falsehoods that are unrelated to national events and heroes. For instance, because achieving political change can be extremely difficult, social movement leaders who wish to mobilize their movement sometimes need to misrepresent the political situation that they currently face.[10] This might involve, say, knowingly

8. David Archard, "Myths, Lies and Historical Truth," *Political Studies* 43, no. 3 (1995); 473; Eamonn, Callan, *Creating Citizens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 101–102; Arash Abizadeh, "Historical Truth, National Myths and Liberal Democracy," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 12, no. 3 (2004): 305.

9. Archard, "Myths," 476–77; Callan, *Creating Citizens*, 115–21; Linda Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 131.

10. Relatedly, Eric Beerbohm and Ryan Davis argue that political mobilizing can require promoting "audacious beliefs." Beerbohm and Davis, "Gaslighting Citizens," *American Journal of Political Science* 67, no. 4 (2023): 867–79. Though I am sympathetic to their analysis, this claim differs importantly from my own. Audacious beliefs are "rationally permissible beliefs that place greater credence in the prospects for one's success than the evidence requires." ibid. at 872. But even if they outstrip the available evidence, such beliefs can be true. Accordingly, speakers who promote them needn't disbelieve what they are saying (this is particularly clear in the case, which Beerbohm and Davis cite, of King's promotion of the audacious belief that the "moral arc" of the universe bends toward justice). By contrast, as explained above, I focus on cases where speakers deploy propositions they believe to be false. This difference matters because, as will be explained in Section II, communicating something one believes is false raises concerns about deception. Now, Beerbohm elsewhere rejects deceptive mobilization. Eric Beerbohm, "Is Democratic Leadership Possible?," *American Political Science Review* 109, no. 4 (2015): 639–52. So, despite defending the promotion of audacious beliefs, he would reject intentional mobilizing falsehoods, at least when they do involve deception. Nevertheless, it is important to note that a practice of promoting audacious beliefs is likely to inherit *some* (albeit not all) of the problems associated with intentional mobilizing falsehoods. Indeed, claims that outstrip the available evidence may end up being false, even if the speaker does not intend this. So, even if promoting audacious beliefs does not strictly speaking constitute deception, it too may lead to false beliefs. I return to this point in Section II.

downplaying the risks associated with political action ("We have nothing to lose."); or knowingly exaggerating the odds of success associated with a given political cause ("If we pull together, we are guaranteed to succeed.").

So mobilizing falsehoods are pervasive in real-world public discourse. And, as will be shown, they can provide powerful resources for mobilizing action in non-ideal circumstances. Yet the practice of deploying such falsehoods is regarded by many with suspicion. In his influential exploration of democratic leadership, for example, Eric Beerbohm rejects the idea of intentionally using false or misleading assertions to mobilize a group. Likewise, Arash Abizadeh severely criticizes the deployment of historical claims that deliberately misrepresent a nation's past, even if these claims help motivate unified political action.[11]

I wish to bracket two immediate concerns that risk confounding the assessment of mobilizing falsehoods. The first relates to the justice of the cause being pursued. Encouraging people to promote injustices seems clearly problematic. Hence, it seems intuitively wrong to use falsehoods as a way of mobilizing support for unjust causes (e.g., by embellishing a nation's imperialist past to mobilize support for colonialism; or by falsely alleging, as Donald Trump's "big lie" has done, that an election is fraudulent to mobilize an anti-democratic coup). Since the wrongness of such pronouncements seems relatively uncontroversial, I wish to focus instead on the practice, exemplified by Douglass's Fourth of July speech, of knowingly deploying falsehoods to mobilize action *in support of a just cause*.

The second concern relates to vilification. A speaker might motivate their audience to pursue a just political cause by falsely representing opponents of that cause as subhuman or ineradicably evil. Lawyers and philosophers disagree about whether such hateful utterances should be legally restricted. But they nonetheless typically agree that they are morally undesirable.[12] My focus will therefore be on the more contested case, where speakers deploy falsehoods that mobilize action *without vilifying opponents*.

11. Arash Abizadeh, "Historical Truth," 297–98.

12. Jeffrey Howard, "Free Speech and Hate Speech," *Annual Review of Political Science* 22 (2019): 93–109.

Is it ever permissible to intentionally deploy (non-vilifying) falsehoods in order to mobilize action that serves a just cause?[13] Even when qualified in this way, the use of mobilizing falsehoods remains deeply controversial, for reasons to be introduced shortly. But I will argue that such falsehoods *can* be permissible in a meaningful set of cases—including, most controversially, in cases where they constitute deception. Opposition to mobilizing falsehoods notably tends to overlook the diversity of ways in which falsehoods can mobilize action, as well as their potential integration within a broader system of democratic contestation. My purpose, in delivering this argument, is therefore threefold. It is, first, to enhance our understanding of the diverse ways in which mobilizing falsehoods operate; second, to defend the moral permissibility of deploying some of these falsehoods in a democratic society; and, third, to identify the conditions in which, in such a society, it is permissible to deploy these falsehoods.

My argument will proceed as follows. Section II outlines the central challenge to mobilizing falsehoods: namely, that they are deceptive, which in turn makes them problematic for reasons relating to both autonomy and democracy. I then develop two complementary responses to this challenge. Second III demonstrates that some falsehoods, which I refer to as "transparent" falsehoods, can mobilize without purporting to be true—and so, without deceiving. On its own, however, this first response does not go far enough, not least because it leaves undefended many highly potent mobilizing falsehoods. Section IV therefore goes on to argue that some mobilizing falsehoods are justified despite being deceptive, and, by extension, that transparency is not a necessary condition of their permissibility.

II. THE CASE AGAINST MOBILIZING FALSEHOODS

Why might mobilizing falsehoods be morally problematic even when they support a just cause, and do not vilify that cause's opponents? The most

13. A further question concerns whether deploying such falsehoods is ever morally *required*. I believe it can be, but will not argue for this stronger conclusion here. Instead, I focus on establishing the more modest—but nevertheless contested—claim that it is permissible.

immediate concern is that such falsehoods seem deceptive.[14] To deceive, Thomas Carson explains, is to intentionally cause someone to have false beliefs that one knows or believes to be false.[15] And this, one might think, is what purveyors of (intentional) mobilizing falsehoods do. The mobilizer who intentionally exaggerates their movement's odds of success aims to cause a false belief (e.g., that the movement is very likely to succeed) in order to encourage justice-promoting action. Similarly, on one interpretation of Douglass's intervention, Douglass knowingly encourages the false belief that the Founders clearly opposed "slavery and oppression," in order to shame his listeners into taking action against slavery.

Mobilizing people by deceiving them seems prima facie problematic in several respects. The first set of problems relates to autonomy. Autonomy involves having control over one's life: I am autonomous, roughly, insofar as I am able to rationally select, and direct myself toward, my goals and

14. This focus on deception might prompt the following worry. Several philosophers have challenged the traditional view that lying necessarily involves an intention to deceive (by appealing, notably, to the phenomenon of bald-faced lies). See, e.g., Roy Sorensen, "Bald-Faced Lies! Lying Without the Intent to Deceive," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 88 (2007): 251–64; Fallis, *Lying*; Carson, *Deception*; and Seana Shiffrin, *Speech Matters: On Lying, Morality, and the Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014). Accordingly, one might object that a focus on deception is ill-suited to explaining what seems problematic about mobilizing falsehoods, since a core category of these falsehoods (namely, those that constitute *lies*) needn't be deceptive. One possible response, here, is to contest the claim that lying needn't involve deceptive intent, as James Mahon, "Review of *Lying and Deception: Theory and Practice*," *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (2011), https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/lying-and-deception-theory-and-practice/, and Paul Faulkner, "Lying and Deceit," in *International Encyclopedia of Ethics*, ed. by Hugh Lafollette (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell), 3101–9, have done. But I do not wish to rely on this response. The more important point is that many of the philosophers who claim that lying needn't involve deceptive intent nonetheless concede that deception explains (or plays a critical role in explaining) why lying is wrong, when it is wrong. For this reason, Fallis ultimately concedes that even if lying needn't involve deceptive intent, it makes sense, for most philosophical purposes, for definitions of lying to "include an 'intent to deceive' condition after all." Fallis, *Lying*, 54–56. See also Sorensen, *Bald-Faced, 263*. This is not to say that deception-related considerations are the *only* possible way to account for the wrong of lying. Shiffrin, for example, raises the worry that lies involve acting on a maxim which, if universalized, would undermine valuable communication. Shiffrin, *Speech Matters*; but see Kate Greasley, "The Morality of Lying and the Murderer at the Door," *Law and Philosophy* 38, no. 5/6 (2019): 439–52, for a powerful response). But deception-related considerations remain an extremely common and intuitive way of explaining this wrong.

15. Carson, *Deception*, 47–58.

values.[16] Causing people to form false beliefs, as deceptive mobilization does, risks impairing this capacity for rational self-direction by making it more difficult for people to identify and pursue courses of action that are congruent with their goals or values.[17] If, for instance, I care deeply about not being arrested, but have false beliefs about the risks of arrest associated with participating in a protest (because a mobilizer downplayed these risks), I may select a course of action that is misaligned with my goals.

But this is only part of the problem. To many philosophers, deceiving people into acting a certain way is disrespectful of their autonomy, not merely because it causes them to form false beliefs (which may make rational self-direction more difficult), but also because it appears to treat them as mere means or instruments for the deceiver's purposes. On this view, by deliberately feeding people falsehoods, the deceptive mobilizer interferes with their rational decision-making process to get them to do something that they would not otherwise do. This, one might worry, makes them into an instrument of the mobilizer's will.[18]

Deceptive mobilization also seems prima facie problematic for reasons relating to democracy. There are different ways of articulating this concern, partly because there are different accounts of what makes democracy valuable. But one of the most widely voiced worries emphasizes the apparent tension between deception and democratic *accountability*.[19] A core value of

16. This conception of autonomy is loosely inspired by Raz's account of autonomy as part-authorship of one's own life. Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

17. Williams, *Truthfulness*, 212.

18. On the link between deception and treating others as mere means, see, e.g., Onora O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Shiffrin, *Speech Matters*, 22.

19. For versions of this "accountability" worry, see e.g., Ramsay, Maureen, "Democratic Dirty Hands," in *Political Lying*, eds. Lionel Cliffe, Maureen Ramsay, and Dave Bartlett (Basingstoke: MacMillan Press, 2000), 27–42, Beerbohm, "Democratic Leadership," 646, Abizadeh, "Historical Truth," 293, Helen Norton, "Government Falsehoods, Democratic Harm, and the Constitution," *Ohio State Law Journal* 86, no. 1 (2021): 2, Derek Edyvane, "The Ethics of Democratic Deceit," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 32, no. 3 (2015): 313, and Williams, *Truthfulness*, 207. Not all political philosophers understand the democratic worry in terms of accountability. In his examination of the relationship between deception and democracy, for instance, Richard Bellamy, "Lies and Deception," in *Political Ethics: A Handbook*, eds. Edward Hall and Andrew Sabl (London: Routledge, 2022), 29–31, suggests that deception is undemocratic because it disrespects the status of the deceived as autonomous agents, and democracy is valuable, in part, as a form of governance committed to respecting citizens' autonomy. On this interpretation, the "democracy" objection largely reduces to the "autonomy" objection outlined above.

democracy holds that power should be exercised in a way that is accountable to those who are subjected to it. An exercise of power is democratically accountable, as I am understanding this notion, to the extent that it is forced to track the concerns and interests of those who are subjected to it.[20]

Why might deception—and deceptive mobilization in particular—be problematic for democratic accountability? A crucial mechanism for holding power democratically accountable is public contestation. That is, one of the most significant ways of ensuring that power is exercised in a way that tracks or responds to citizens' concerns and interests is for citizens to publicly question, debate, and criticize exercises of power and the justifications offered in support of them.[21] Yet political deception, it is often held, sits in tension with such contestatory practices.

There are at least two ways of spelling out this tension. The most common account starts from the observation that, in order effectively to challenge or criticize exercises of power, we need accurate information concerning how that power is being exercised.[22] The problem with deception, on this view, is that it risks depriving the deceived of information that is relevant to assessing exercises of power—and, more specifically, to assessing whether exercises of power are appropriately responsive to their concerns and interests. As a result, Beerbohm worries that deceptive mobilization risks "depriv[ing] us of the ability to hold political actors to answer for their statements and actions."[23]

20. On this account, which is notably inspired by Philip Pettit, *Republicanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 183–200, the value of democratic accountability can be understood in instrumental as well as non-instrumental terms. Unaccountable or unchecked power is problematic partly because it is less likely to be exercised in a way that satisfies the interests of those subjected to it. But it is also problematic because, as Pettit suggests, subjection to unaccountable power *constitutes* a morally undesirable condition of domination. Ibid. Though I am sympathetic to both the instrumental and the non-instrumental claim, my argument is compatible with either.

21. On this point, see, e.g., Ibid. at 186; Philip Pettit, *On the People's Terms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 225–29; Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 112, 132.

22. For extensive discussion of the claim that democratic accountability requires accurate information, see Ilya Somin, *Democracy and Political Ignorance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016).

23. Beerbohm, "Gaslighing," 646. For other articulations of this argument, see, e.g., Ramsay, "Dirty Hands," 25, who claims that "accountability is seriously undermined by [. . .] deception" because "without accurate information it is not possible to hold public officials to account"; Williams, *Truthfulness*, 207, who asserts that truthfulness matters partly because exercises of power "cannot be checked without true information"; and Norton, "Government Falsehoods," 2, for whom "intentional [. . .] falsehoods can frustrate democratic self-governance when they deny the public the information it needs to hold the government accountable for its performance."

Suppose, for example, that a mobilizer is trying to get you to go out and vote for a healthcare bill. To do so, they falsely deny that the bill contains a controversial provision (e.g., tax increases).[24] The resulting false belief plausibly impairs your capacity to engage in effective contestation. If you knew that the bill contained this provision, you would publicly question the decision to enact it, demand justifications of the lawmakers proposing to do so, and publicly debate whether this provision is really responsive to your concerns. But given that deception has deprived you of this information, you lack a key epistemic precondition for engaging in this contestation.

Yet, this first way of spelling out the tension between deception and contestation lends itself to an immediate response. Even if a mobilizer's deployment of intentional falsehoods makes it more difficult accurately to assess—and so, effectively to contest—a particular exercise of power, it is still presumably possible to subject the mobilizer's *falsehoods* to contestation.[25] For example, those who are mobilized, as well as other speakers in the democratic system, might publicly challenge the mobilizer's claim about the healthcare bill's provisions (or, returning to my earlier examples, about the Founders' record on slavery, or about the risks associated with a given protest).

There is something clearly right about this response. Subjecting mobilizing falsehoods to robust contestation is indeed an important tool for holding mobilizers accountable to those whom they mobilize. But this response leads straight to the second version of the accountability worry. On this line of thought, subjecting a deceptive mobilizing falsehood to robust contestation is bound to undermine belief in that falsehood. For instance, one might worry that, if people publicly criticize a mobilizer's exaggerations concerning the odds that a protest will be successful, this will lead the mobilizer's audience not to believe these exaggerations. And so, it will render these exaggerations ineffective.

An apparent dilemma therefore emerges. If we wish to preserve the motivational force associated with deceptive mobilizing falsehoods, then we should refrain from subjecting them to public contestation.

24. See Somin, *Political Ignorance*, 27 for discussion of a similar case.

25. See, e.g., David Miller, *On Nationality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 38 and Cecile Laborde, "From Constitutional to Civic Patriotism," *British Journal of Political Science* 32, no. 4 (2002): 611, for the view that falsehoods or myths should be embedded within a process of democratic contestation.

But foregoing the contestation of mobilizing falsehoods means foregoing one of the most important mechanisms for holding mobilizers accountable to those whom they mobilize. Thus, the worry concludes, the aim of deploying effective mobilizing falsehoods seems incompatible with one of the most important processes for holding mobilizers democratically accountable. Abizadeh, whose critique of national myths highlights a version of this dilemma, concludes that deceptive myths should be the ones to give way, not the accountability-enhancing process of contestation.[26]

To be clear, not all of the foregoing worries are specific to deception. Someone who promotes a falsehood that they actually believe may not intend to cause false beliefs, and may therefore not deceive—but they can (and often do) nevertheless cause their audience to form false beliefs. Such accidental falsehoods can therefore, like intentional falsehoods, make it more difficult for people to rationally direct themselves, and deprive them of information that is relevant to contesting particular exercises of power. Hence, the case against intentional mobilizing falsehoods may also yield an argument for thinking that it is impermissible to mobilize people without ensuring that one's mobilizing claims (whether one believes them or not) are adequately supported by the evidence.[27]

There are nonetheless limits to these moral similarities. In particular, though accidentally deploying falsehoods can undoubtedly cause false beliefs, it is far less clear that doing so treats the audience as mere means. In what follows, therefore, I will continue to focus on the case, which remains prima facie more morally troubling, of intentional mobilizing falsehoods.

How might one respond to the case against these falsehoods? An immediate reply might simply point to the fact that, in non-ideal conditions, many speakers *already* use intentional falsehoods to mobilize their audiences—including, often, in support of unjust political causes

26. Abizadeh,"Historical Truth," 299–300. Margaret Canovan, "On Being Economical with the Truth: Some Liberal Reflections," *Political Studies* 38, no. 1 (1990): 17, draws a related conclusion about the tension between contestation and effectiveness in her influential examination of liberal democratic myths, though she draws the opposite conclusion. She concedes that subjecting myths to close scrutiny might undermine their practical function, and therefore suggests that "radical criticism [should be] kept within bounds by general deference to a salutary myth."

27. For discussion of cases where political actors culpably deploy falsehoods that they believe, see Anna Galeotti's excellent analysis of "political self-deception." Anna Galeotti, *Political Self-Deception*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

(e.g., overturning the results of a democratic election, or obstructing vaccination schemes that are essential to public health).[28] On this line of thought, the fact that other speakers are already deploying mobilizing falsehoods makes it permissible to do so, even if doing so would otherwise be impermissible. One common reason for this view is that, in such non-ideal contexts, refraining from deploying falsehoods is likely to put mobilizers pursuing a just cause ("just" mobilizers) at a strategic disadvantage relative to "unjust" mobilizers who do not exercise such restraint.[29]

This initial response is important. In general, when choosing between different mobilizing tactics, we are morally required to avoid tactics that give rise to unnecessary harms or unnecessary moral costs.[30] Thus, if a

28. See, e.g., Michael Petersen, "The Evolutionary Psychology of Mass Mobilization: How Disinformation and Demagogues Coordinate Rather than Manipulate," *Current Opinion in Psychology* 35 (2020): 71–75, on the role commonly played by falsehoods in mobilizing action (including in the service of unjust causes); and Lynnette Ng, Iain Cruickshank, and Kathleen Carley, "Cross-Platform Information Spread during the January 6th Capitol Riots," *Social Network Analysis and Mining* 12, no. 1 (2022): 1–16, more specifically, on falsehoods' role in mobilizing the January 6 storming of the US Capitol.

29. Samuel Bagg and Isak Tranvig, "An Adversarial Ethics for Campaigns and Elections," *Perspectives on Politics* 17, no. 4 (2019): 973–87, appeal to similar considerations when defending the use of underhanded campaign tactics. Note that this is not the only conceivable reason why the fact that others deploy intentional falsehoods might make it permissible to do so. Another influential argument suggests that those who intentionally deploy falsehoods thereby forfeit their right not to be deceived. See, e.g., Sissela Bok, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* (New York: Random House, 1978), 132–33; Christine Korsgaard, *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 136–37. This second reason, however, is less obviously relevant for my purposes. While it might explain why it is permissible for mobilizers to deceive other deceivers (including other deceptive mobilizers), it does not explain why the mobilizer may permissibly deceive their audience (unless audience members are also deploying falsehoods). Having said that, Section IV.B. will examine a closely related point: namely, that the audience's moral connection to injustice can make it more permissible to deceive them.

30. I am appealing, here, to a version of the "necessity" condition, which is most familiar from debates about just war (Helen Frowe, *The Ethics of War and Peace: An Introduction—2nd Edition* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 12–13), but has more recently been applied to other domains, including violent protest (Avia Pasternak, "Political Rioting: A Moral Assessment," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 46, no. 4 (2019): 386) and prohibitions on dangerous speech (Jeffrey Howard, "Dangerous Speech," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 47, no. 2 (2019): 248). Note that the sense of necessity I am referring to, here and below, is fairly weak: falsehoods are said to be necessary insofar as the speaker plausibly could not mobilize the audience as effectively without them. A substantially stronger sense of necessity might require that the speaker could not mobilize *at all* without them. But satisfying the weaker sense is enough to allay the concern that resorting to mobilizing falsehoods gives rise to unnecessary, and therefore gratuitous, moral costs.

mobilizer could readily mobilize their audience just as effectively without resorting to deception, then, other things being equal, it would be wrong for them to resort to deception. The present response matters, in part, because it helps stave off this "necessity" objection: if not deploying falsehoods would place just mobilizers at a significant strategic disadvantage relative to unjust mobilizers, such falsehoods might plausibly be needed successfully to advance their just cause.

But considerations of necessity alone are not sufficient to justify the deployment of mobilizing falsehoods. From the fact that a particular tactic is needed effectively to advance a just cause (perhaps, in part, because one's opponents are already using it), it does not necessarily follow that its use is permissible. This point is familiar from just war theory. Even if torture increased our chances of winning a just war in a way that could not readily be achieved without torture, still this would not make it permissible to deploy torture (including against unjust combatants who themselves practice torture). The reason, intuitively, has to do with the moral force of the considerations against torture: even if torture is needed to win, it might still be "disproportionate," in the sense that the moral costs associated with it outweigh its moral benefits.[31]

Hence, even in conditions where mobilizing falsehoods are already commonly deployed—and where, partly as a result, deploying them is plausibly needed effectively to promote the just cause—successfully defending mobilizing falsehoods requires closely examining the moral costs outlined above, with a view to assessing whether they exceed, or are instead proportionate to, the likely benefits of mobilizing falsehoods. Accordingly, I will explore two strategies for defending mobilizing falsehoods in the face of these moral considerations. The first questions the claim that such falsehoods are necessarily deceptive (and thus, that they incur the autonomy- and democracy-related costs just outlined; Section III). The second contends that, even when they *are* deceptive, the moral costs purportedly associated with this deception do not always have overriding force (Section IV).[32]

31. For discussion of the proportionality condition in the context of war, violent protest, and dangerous speech, respectively, see Frowe (*The Ethics of War and Peace*, 11–12), Pasternak ("Political Rioting," 406–7), and Howard ("Dangerous Speech," 212).

32. My principal focus in what follows will therefore be on the proportionality of mobilizing falsehoods—i.e., whether and when their moral benefits are likely to outweigh their purported moral costs. But I will have more to say, briefly, about necessity, in Section III.B.

III. ARE MOBILIZING FALSEHOODS NECESSARILY DECEPTIVE?

One would not consider a novel deceptive simply because it tells a story that is not true. The reason, of course, is that novels characteristically do not *purport* to say something true. And, because of these characteristic facts about the genre, it is usually plain to readers of novels that what they are reading is false. A first way of defending mobilizing falsehoods proceeds analogously. On this view, deploying mobilizing falsehoods is not necessarily deceptive because, in uttering the falsehood, the speaker does not necessarily purport to be saying something true. Indeed, some mobilizing falsehoods are *transparently* false: the speaker does not intend for their audience to believe that the falsehood they utter is true; and, accordingly, they deploy the falsehood in a way, or in a context, that makes it plain that it is not true.[33] Such transparent falsehoods are intended to motivate action, not by inducing false beliefs in the audience—and so, not by deceiving the audience—but by means of some other mechanism.[34] This alternative mechanism can take different forms: some are non-representational (Section III.A), while others are representational (Section III.B).

III.A. Non-Representational Mechanisms

To begin, a transparent falsehood might aim to motivate without purporting to represent the way the world is. There are at least two ways such a falsehood could do this. First, a false claim might play an *expressive* function,

33. For the observation that some political falsehoods, including some national myths, are not intended to be taken as true, and may thus be conveyed in a way that makes their falsity transparent, see, e.g., Archard, "Myths," 474–75, Abizadeh, "Historical Truths," 296–97. For further discussion of contexts where expectations of truthfulness are "suspended," such that false claims are transparently false, see Fallis, *Lying*, 33–37 and Shiffrin, *Speech Matters*, 16–19, both of whom appeal to such contexts to distinguish fiction (alongside other kinds of morally uncontroversial falsehoods) from lies.

34. Note that some mobilizing falsehoods are neither transparent nor deceptive. In between the two categories, there is a "grey area" where the speaker does not intend to cause their audience to form false beliefs (such that they do not deceive the audience), but where they fail to make it plain that the falsehood they deploy is false (such that the falsehood is not transparent). As explained in Section II, such falsehoods are liable foreseeably to cause false beliefs, and therefore share *some* (though not all) of the moral costs associated with deceptive mobilizing falsehoods. I will not directly examine these falsehoods in what follows: Section III focuses on transparent falsehoods, and Section IV on deceptive falsehoods. Nevertheless, because of their partial moral overlap with deceptive falsehoods, my defense of some deceptive mobilizing falsehoods provides grounds for thinking that falsehoods in this intermediate category can also sometimes permissibly be deployed.

rather than a representational one. In this case, the point of deploying the falsehood is not to describe a state of affairs, but rather to express an attitude.

Consider an example. Shortly after taking office in 2009, U.S. President Barack Obama declared that "we [the United States] don't torture." Understood literally, as a descriptive statement of fact, this was widely known to be false. But Richard Holton argues that Obama's statement was not deceptive. This is because, in context, Obama's claim that "we don't torture" did not purport to describe or represent U.S. practice. Rather, voicing this false proposition served to express an attitude. For Holton, more specifically, doing so served to express an *intention* to stop U.S. torture.[35] But we could plausibly interpret the utterance as serving to express other attitudes besides this one—for example, a *desire* that the United States not torture; or, alternatively, a *moral belief* that torture is wrong.[36]

How does this expressive function relate to mobilization? Publicly expressing an attitude can help activate that attitude in those who are inclined to share it. For example, expressing a desire or intention can remind others that they, too, share this desire or intention, thus making their own desire or intention more salient to them. Insofar as the attitude in question is motivationally efficacious, this can help motivate them to take action.

Take, for instance, the "Not My President" slogan deployed during anti-Trump protests in 2017. Understood descriptively, the slogan was obviously false: Donald Trump had just become the protestors' President. But the slogan was of course not intended to be understood descriptively. Instead, it served to express a set of attitudes toward Trump's presidency: in particular, a desire that Trump not be President; and an intention to resist his policies. Insofar as these attitudes are motivationally efficacious, expressing them, and thereby activating them in others, can move others

35. Richard Holton, "We Don't Torture: Moral Resolutions, Temptation, and the Doctrine of Double Effect," *Journal of the British Academy* 5 (2017): 309–10.

36. If one interprets Obama as expressing this (true) moral belief, then one might say that the purpose of voicing the falsehood is to represent the world after all (in particular, to represent *moral facts* about the world). On this last interpretation, then, the transparent falsehood in question arguably plays an expressive function *and* a representational function. I will examine transparent representational falsehoods in Section III.B. In the meantime, in order more clearly to disentangle these functions of transparent falsehoods, I will focus on the expression of attitudes, such as desires or intentions, that are conative, and thus do not purport to represent the way the world is.

to action. And, indeed, the slogan was arguably instrumental in mobilizing protestors across the United States.

The practice of deploying purely expressive falsehoods thus has real mobilizing potential. And since, as explained above, a mobilizer can deploy expressive falsehoods without pretending or giving the misleading impression that these falsehoods are true, this practice seems capable of avoiding the deception-related moral costs outlined in Section II.

Nevertheless, a defense of mobilizing falsehoods should not stop here. This is because, although the mobilizing force of purely expressive falsehoods is real, it also faces important limits. The mechanism just outlined often requires that the speaker's audience already have a motivationally efficacious attitude toward the just cause in question. Stating the falsehood then helps to activate this attitude, by making it salient to them, and thus bringing it to bear on the situation at hand. Indeed, the slogan "Not My President" was not primarily used to *create* a desire or intention to oppose Trump. More often, it served as a trigger for those who already shared these attitudes. A similar point applies to the Douglass example. If Douglass's claim that the Founders opposed slavery *merely* served an expressive function—e.g., the function of expressing a desire to end slavery—then it might resonate with, and help rally, those who already shared this desire. If construed purely expressively, however, this claim might do relatively little to *create* such an attitude in those who previously lacked it.

This constitutes a meaningful limitation because, in non-ideal conditions, people often lack motivationally efficacious attitudes toward just causes. This can be because they do not recognize that particular causes are just. But it can also be because, though they appreciate a particular cause's justice, they lack a strong desire to act in support of it.

Yet, falsehoods can also help mobilize political action via other non-representational mechanisms. Most notably, falsehoods can also perform a *constructivist* function. Some falsehoods do not purport to represent or describe the way the world is. Nor do they necessarily aim to express motivationally efficacious attitudes.[37] Instead, their communication aims

37. The qualifier "necessarily" is important. The same pronouncement can *both* express a motivationally efficacious attitude *and* help construct new attitudes. But the two functions can also come apart. Someone might use a falsehood to create motivationally efficacious attitudes that they do not themselves share. And, conversely, they can express attitudes without anyone coming to share them as a result.

to create or construct the world, in part by creating or constructing new motivationally efficacious attitudes.

In what sense can speech "construct" the world? Some philosophers emphasize the fact that utterances can *constitute* certain acts—and, in so doing, can change the world. An official who pronounces two people married does not aim to describe or represent the fact that they are married. Rather, their pronouncement *makes it the case* that those two people are married.[38] But my focus here will be on the more prosaic sense in which speech can reshape the world: quite simply, speech can *cause* new things to come into being.[39]

In the case of falsehoods—and mobilizing falsehoods in particular—this constructivist function has perhaps most prominently been explored in the context of myth-making and identity. Deploying falsehoods can help cause the construction of a shared identity, and thus unite a group of people around that shared identity.[40] Consider, for instance, a transparently fictional tale (similar in kind to the tales of King Arthur, or the parable of the Good Samaritan). Disseminating such a myth, and thereby promoting familiarity with it, can help create a shared identity: the myth might come to serve as a common reference point for those familiar with it[41]; it might serve as the basis for common rites[42]; it might be integrated in popular entertainment[43]; and so on.

So, deploying transparent falsehoods—that is, deploying falsehoods without intending others to believe them, and while being open about their falsity—can help create a shared identity. How, in turn, might such identity-generating falsehoods mobilize people to act in support of a just cause? Part of the answer is that a group unified by shared reference points (in this case, common myths), which constitute a shared "language," may find it easier to coordinate in pursuit of a just cause. But the point is not

38. Rae Langton, *Sexual Solipsism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

39. For the distinction between causal and constitutive construction, see Amia Srinivasan, "Genealogy, Epistemology, and Worldmaking," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 119 (2019): 145.

40. On the role of transparent falsehoods and myths in identity-construction, see Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans: The National Experience* (New York: Random House, 1965), chap. 38, Miller, *On Nationality*, 35–36, Laborde, "Civic Patriotism," 611, Abizadeh, "Historical Truth," 297.

41. Laborde, "Civic Patriotism," 611; Abizadeh, "Historical Truth," 311.

42. Abizadeh, "Historical Truth," 297.

43. Boorstin, *The Americans*, chap. 38.

just about coordinating. It is also, and perhaps more importantly, that identity-generating falsehoods can help *motivate* action. Here, the content of the myth matters. Identity-generating myths often involve what Linda Zagzebski calls "moral exemplars": saints, heroes, or sages who personify various forms of moral excellence. The Good Samaritan, for instance, personifies selflessness and charity. King Arthur, for his part, might stand for courage. These exemplars, Zagzebski argues, can inspire us to emulate them by pursuing just or otherwise virtuous courses of action.[44]

But this constructivist account of how falsehoods can mobilize just action raises a concern. This section, recall, has been considering transparent falsehoods that mobilize without purporting to help describe or represent the way the world really is. For this reason, the identity-generating myths considered so far (e.g., myths about King Arthur or the Good Samaritan) do not purport to represent real people or real events. This assumption matters because it allows constructive falsehoods, like purely expressive falsehoods, to avoid moral worries associated with deception. But if a moral exemplar does not purport to represent someone or something real, one might worry that it will also lack motivational power. After all, why should we care about the feats of fictional individuals, like King Arthur or the Good Samaritan? And so, why should we want to emulate them?

The point is not that wholly and transparently false moral exemplars *cannot* inspire just acts of emulation. They sometimes can. Nevertheless, such exemplars fail to tap into some of our most potent sources of motivation. In practice, some of our strongest sources of inspiration tend to be the character and deeds of real people—particularly real people we take ourselves to have some connection to (our ancestors, friends, conationals, etc.).[45]

There are several reasons for this. An exemplar's being real matters, first, because it can make their deeds seem feasible, and so capable of being emulated. And it matters, second, because many social connections that are liable to make us care about a person, such that we want to emulate them, depend on that person being real. For instance, we can see ourselves as descended from, indebted to, or accountable to a real person in

44. Zagzebski, *Exemplarist*, chap. 3–5.

45. Accordingly, despite claiming that fictional exemplars can be just as important as real-world exemplars, ibid. at 66, Zagzebski's analysis, ibid. at chap. 3–5, appeals overwhelmingly to real-world exemplars.

a way that is typically impossible with people we know are purely fictional. And perceived connections such as these often have motivational force. They might, for example, induce motivationally efficacious attitudes of pride (e.g., in one's ancestors), of guilt (e.g., regarding unpaid moral debts), or of responsibility (e.g., toward those one is accountable to). To rely exclusively on identity-generating falsehoods that do not purport to represent real people or events, then, is to forego a powerful source of motivation.[46]

This suggests that, other things being equal, the motivational force supplied by identity-generating falsehoods is likely to be stronger when those falsehoods relate to real people or events. So, rather than putting forward exemplars that are *purely* fictional, a mobilizer might deploy falsehoods that idealize real people and events their audience cares about, in order to associate those people or events with just causes.

Consider again Douglass's appeal to the Founders. Douglass tries to mobilize his audience against slavery, not by putting forward wholly fictional moral exemplars, but rather by idealizing real historical figures. This is no accident. Douglass's audience have a pre-existing attachment to these historical figures, which depends very much on their being real. Indeed, the Founders' historical reality means that Douglass's audience can see themselves, for example, as descended from them, as indebted to them, as inheritors of their political project, and so on. Accordingly, the mobilizing force of Douglass's appeal comes partly from the fact that, by idealizing these real historical figures, he taps into a vast motivational reservoir, and directs its energies toward a just cause.

The broader upshot is that interpreting mobilizing falsehoods exclusively in non-representational terms comes at a meaningful mobilizational cost. Section III.A began by considering the possibility that transparent falsehoods might mobilize without purporting to describe or represent the world. Insofar as this is possible, mobilizing falsehoods are innocent of

46. There is no quantitative evidence *directly* comparing the motivational effects of real and fictional exemplars. However, existing research provides preliminary support for my suggestion. Hyemin Han, Clifford Workman, Joshua May, Payton Scholtens, Kelsie Dawson, and Andrea Glenn, "Which Moral Exemplars Inspire Prosociality?" *Philosophical Psychology* 35 (2021): 943–70 find that more relatable exemplars (and, to a lesser degree, more attainable exemplars) have a greater influence on behavior. If, as I suggest, their being real increases the perceived social relations one can have with an exemplar, and the perceived feasibility of emulating them, this supports the claim that "real" exemplars are likely to have greater motivational force.

the charge of deception. But, as discussed, the mobilizing force of falsehoods is often likely to be strongest when those falsehoods relate to someone or something real. In the case of identity-generating falsehoods, for instance, falsehoods can help construct identities and, with them, new motivationally efficacious states. Yet, for the reasons canvassed above, their success at doing so may be quite limited unless they purport to represent real people or events. This gives rise to the following conclusion: either mobilizing falsehoods do play a function that is at least partly representational (in addition to their expressive and/or constructivist functions), or their motivational potential, though real, is meaningfully curtailed.

III.B. Representational Mechanisms

From the preceding argument, one might conclude that, for falsehoods to realize their full mobilizing potential, they must purport to be true. This, in turn, reintroduces the specter of deception—and with it, the worry that mobilizing falsehoods might come at a disproportionate moral cost. But this conclusion would be too quick. As I will now show, transparent falsehoods (which, to reiterate, are not intended to be taken as true, and are deployed in a manner or context that makes this plain) can sometimes play a mobilization-enhancing representational function.

To appreciate this, consider first the practice of scientific modeling. As philosophers of science have shown, scientific models invariably contain falsehoods, which simplify, idealize, or otherwise distort the objects that models purport to represent. For example, models of the Solar System often represent planets, incorrectly, as point masses. But these falsehoods do not purport to be true. Scientists generally know that the falsehoods incorporated within their models are false, and are open about this fact. Nevertheless, these transparent falsehoods are typically intended to help represent something real about the model's target object. Misrepresenting planets as point masses, for instance, can help simplify our representation of the Solar System, and thereby render some of its features (e.g., the forces that govern planets' relative movement) more visible than they would otherwise be.[47]

47. Catherin Elgin, *True Enough* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017), chap. 9–12; Maxime Lepoutre, "Political Understanding," *British Journal of Political Science* 53 (2023): 351–54.

This phenomenon carries over to the case of mobilizing falsehoods. Consider the often-retold story of the 1940 "Miracle of Dunkirk," which involved evacuating over 300,000 Allied soldiers from the beaches and harbors of Dunkirk during World War II. The story, as it is usually told, involves numerous idealizations and distortions. For instance, it is said to exaggerate the part played by civilian "little ships" in evacuating Allied soldiers, as well as the role of civilians within those little ships.[48]

These distortions are commonly recognized as such. But this does not prevent them from playing an important representational function, even for those who recognize their falsity. Just as the transparent falsehoods embedded in a scientific model help represent real features of its target, so too the Dunkirk story's distortions help represent real features of this historical event.[49] For example, the exaggerated role ascribed to *little ships* helps highlight at least three actual features of the evacuation: first, the real courage demonstrated by those involved in the evacuation; second, the fact that the evacuation succeeded despite difficult odds; and, third, the fact that small contributions (modeled, once again, by the little ships) did make a difference.

This representational function seems deeply relevant to mobilization. Highlighting the three features just mentioned could motivate action by inspiring the desire to emulate real exemplars of courage; by inspiring hope that success is possible even in the face of difficult odds; and by inspiring an empowering sense that one's small acts can contribute to that success.

This example shows that it seems possible to deploy mobilizing falsehoods that help represent something real, while being transparently false. This possibility is promising, as it seems to reconcile the two desiderata highlighted in the preceding discussion. First, representing features of real people or real events matters because, as explained in Section III.A, many people derive distinctively strong motivation from real exemplars. At the same time, the fact that the falsehoods in question can play their mobilizing representational function while being transparently false allows them to sidestep the charge of deception (and the attending moral costs) introduced in Section II. Speakers can deploy these mobilizing falsehoods while being perfectly open about their falsity.

48. Nicholas Harman, *Dunkirk: The Necessary Myth* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1980); Archard, "Myths," 473.

49. Archard, "Myths," 473–74.

However, the mechanism under consideration, and the happy reconciliation it allows, are not always available. The Dunkirk story is distinctive in that the actors who were actually involved, and whom a (British) audience is likely to feel connected to, really *did* demonstrate courage, and really *did* overcome difficult odds. So, what really happened, and the claims needed to mobilize just action, are aligned with one another. This felicitous alignment explains why it is possible to deploy falsehoods that mobilize *by* highlighting something real.

But not all cases are like this. Part of what is non-ideal, in non-ideal conditions, is that the people whom the speaker's audience feel most strongly connected to, and whom they are most strongly motivated to emulate, are often not good exemplars—either because they lack moral excellence, or because their attempts at effecting moral change failed. Take, once more, the Founders. Whatever commitment they may have had to upholding liberty, this commitment did not in practice extend, for the vast majority of them, to slavery. So, a falsehood that simply aims to model what the Founders really thought and did about slavery will not represent morally admirable thoughts and deeds. Hence, it will be ill-suited to mobilizing just action in this domain.

In such cases, connecting the people that one's audience cares about to just deeds may therefore require misrepresenting them, by deploying falsehoods about them that purport to be true. According to Kevin McClure, this is precisely what Douglass does in his Fourth of July speech. Douglass, as mentioned above, recognized his audience's immense admiration for the Founders, and realized that it would therefore constitute a very powerful mobilizing resource, if connected to the abolitionist cause.[50] But, given the Founders' actual record on slavery, connecting this immense admiration to the abolitionist cause required idealizing the Founders, in a way that "rema[de]" their views on slavery.[51] And, importantly, these distortions were plausibly intended to be believed by the

50. See McClure, "Oration," 431–32, for discussion of this point. According to McClure, the quasi-religious reverence most Americans felt for the Founders constituted both a rhetorical constraint and a rhetorical opportunity for Douglass. On the one hand, it meant that "Douglass's audience [. . .] were not at all likely to respond favorably to a general condemnation of the 'Founding Fathers.'" Ibid. at 431. But it also meant that, by "rhetorically constructing the 'Founding Fathers' as the historical, moral, and political antecedents to the abolitionists" Douglass could tap into his audience's strong "predispos[ition] to identify with [. . .] the motives and qualities of the 'Founding Fathers.'" Ibid. at 432.

51. Ibid., 439.

audience: the false belief *that the Founders opposed slavery* plays a critical role in translating powerful admiration for the Founders into powerful anti-slavery mobilization.

The upshot is this. Focusing on falsehoods that serve a representational function without purporting to be true leaves out an important category of mobilizing falsehoods. In many cases that are symptomatic of non-ideal conditions, falsehoods' ability to generate powerful motivations in support of a just cause depends on their purporting to be true. In other words, and to put this in terms of the necessity condition outlined in Section II, non-transparent falsehoods are sometimes needed to tap into highly potent sources of motivation, such that mobilizers may struggle to mobilize their audience as effectively if they wholly eschew non-transparent falsehoods. And, as attested by the celebrated Douglass case, at least *some* of these non-transparent mobilizing falsehoods seem prima facie permissible.

Where does this leave my broader argument? I have considered a first response to the claim that mobilizing falsehoods are deceptive, and therefore impermissible. This response denies that mobilizing falsehoods are intended to be believed by the audience. On this line of thought, falsehoods can mobilize while being transparently false, and therefore without deceiving their audience.

It seems uncontroversial that such "transparent" falsehoods are permissible. But what is more controversial is whether mobilizing falsehoods should be deemed permissible *only* if they are transparently false. Some political theorists believe they should.[52] Yet, I have outlined two reasons to resist this conclusion. The first relates to effectiveness. Although non-representational functions of falsehoods can play a mobilizing role, their motivational potential remains limited in important respects. A falsehood's effectiveness at motivating just conduct is often amplified when that falsehood helps represent real people or real events (Section III.A). Of course, as discussed above, some transparent falsehoods *can* help represent real people and real events in a mobilization-enhancing way. But—and this is the second reason—even if one recognizes this possibility, taking transparency as a necessary condition still seems too narrow. Doing so rules out some particularly potent mobilizing falsehoods that seem intuitively permissible (Section III.B). In the rest of this article, I therefore

52. See, e.g., Abizadeh, "Historical Truth," 292.

wish to consider non-transparent mobilizing falsehoods, and the conditions of their permissibility, more carefully.

IV. ARE NON-TRANSPARENT MOBILIZING FALSEHOODS ALWAYS WRONG?

I have argued that, in non-ideal conditions, harnessing highly potent sources of motivation in the service of a just cause sometimes requires deploying falsehoods that are not transparent. In these cases, the mobilizer purports to be saying something true; and, as discussed in Section III.B, the mobilizing effect of what they say depends crucially on the audience believing them. Yet, even if non-transparent falsehoods are sometimes necessary—in the sense that we plausibly could not mobilize just political action as effectively if we wholly refrained from using them—one might still think that deploying such falsehoods is impermissible. For non-transparent falsehoods are deceptive. And, as noted in Section II, one might think that the moral costs associated with deception are simply too great, and that using non-transparent falsehoods to mobilize a group is therefore disproportionate. In what follows, I wish to explore three broad strategies for resisting this conclusion.

IV.A. The Instrumental Benefits of Mobilizing Falsehoods

The most obvious way of responding to concerns about the proportionality of deceptive mobilization is to emphasize its countervailing justice-related benefits. Remember: I am focusing on cases where falsehoods are deployed to encourage mobilization in the service of a just cause. Insofar as the mobilizing falsehood succeeds, it therefore helps counteract injustices, for example by helping (as Douglass's rhetoric does) to dismantle racist institutions. One might think that these instrumental benefits simply outweigh deception's moral costs.

I agree that this is in principle possible. When mobilizing falsehoods successfully advance a just cause, and advance it to a significant degree, the moral significance of this achievement may sometimes dwarf the moral problems associated with deception, thereby rendering these falsehoods proportionate.

One might worry, however, that such cases are likely to be extremely rare. Prima facie, the moral costs associated with deceptive mobilization seem substantial. As discussed in Section II, deception risks disrespecting the autonomy of the deceived; and the effectiveness of

deceptive mobilization seemingly requires foregoing contestatory practices that are crucial to holding mobilizers democratically accountable. So, even if the instrumental justice-related benefits of mobilizing falsehoods can in principle outweigh these potential costs, the set of cases where this applies could in practice be vanishingly small. This, in turn, would suggest that it is very nearly always wrong for mobilizers to deploy non-transparent falsehoods.

IV.B. The Audience's Liability to Costs

One strategy for alleviating this last worry is to argue that, even if non-transparent falsehoods impose substantial costs on the mobilizer's audience, that audience may be morally *liable* to bear these costs, such that they have no moral claim not to have these costs imposed on them.[53]

This argument applies most clearly in cases where the audience are complicit in producing the injustices that the mobilizer seeks to counter. Suppose, for example, that Douglass's audience is composed of former slaveholders. In this case, the audience's complicity with a grave injustice puts them under a stringent duty to repair this injustice. This, in turn, makes it permissible to impose some costs on them in the service of repairing the injustice—notably, by deceiving them—that it might otherwise be impermissible to impose.[54]

Justifying the deceptive mobilization of bystanders—who are neither complicit in, nor victims of, the injustice—is intuitively less straightforward.[55] But bystanders can nonetheless be liable to bear *some* meaningful costs to offset injustices. One reason for this is that we all have humanitarian duties to assist those in need (in this case, victims of injustice), in virtue of which we are liable to incur certain costs. Accordingly, a mobilizer could justifiably impose otherwise-impermissible costs on bystanders

53. See Howard, "Dangerous Speech," Sections 2 and 3, for a similar characterization of liability. As Howard notes, costs or harms imposed on those who are liable to bear them are commonly said to be *narrowly proportionate* (212).

54. My articulation of this point is inspired by just war theoretical discussions of liability to harm. See also Howard, "Dangerous Speech," for an adaptation of this framework to political speech. But other moral frameworks can also account for the intuition that deception is easier to justify when it targets wrongdoers. Shiffrin, *Speech Matters*, 33–34, for example, uses a Kantian framework to explain this moral phenomenon.

55. Shiffrin, *Speech Matters*, 34.

when doing so is needed to assist victims of injustice, and when these bystanders have not yet discharged their humanitarian duties.

The hardest case, from the perspective of liability, is that of deceptively mobilizing victims of injustice themselves.[56] Imagine, for instance, that Douglass is speaking to an audience composed, not of perpetrators of slavery, nor of mere bystanders, but rather of former slaves like himself. While victims of a given injustice can in principle also be under humanitarian duties to aid other victims,[57] they have characteristically *already* borne significant costs relating to this injustice. Hence, they are often not required to bear *further* costs in the service of opposing it. And even if we assume that they are, still it seems plausible to think that, given the costs they have already incurred, they are usually liable to bear substantially fewer costs than wrongdoers or bystanders.[58]

My point is not that it is never proportionate, and therefore never permissible, deceptively to mobilize victims of injustice against that very injustice. Doing so could be justified as a lesser evil in cases where, as discussed in Section IV.A, the justice-related benefits of mobilization dwarf the moral costs associated with deception.[59] Rather, the point is that, holding these justice-related benefits equal, imposing the costs standardly associated with deception is easier to justify insofar as the mobilizer's audience have made themselves liable to these costs—

56. A further worry about deceptively mobilizing victims is that doing so is paternalistic, because it interferes with these victims *for their own good*. But this worry is slightly too quick. In the cases I have been considering, the mobilizer's aim is first and foremost to counteract a certain injustice. And this injustice may very well affect, not only the particular victims who are being mobilized, but other victims too. For example, if Douglass mobilizes a group of former slaves to act against slavery, his intention may well be, not only to promote *that group's good*, but rather to help victims of slavery more generally. Thus, the mobilizer who deceives victims of injustice needn't be motivated exclusively, or even primarily, by the good of the group thereby interfered with. See Gerald Dworkin, "Paternalism," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2020, Section 2, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/paternalism/, for discussion of what constitutes a distinctively paternalistic motivation.

57. Ashwini Vasanthakumar, "Recent Debates on Victims' Duties to Resist Their Oppression," *Philosophy Compass* 15, no. 2 (2020): 1–8.

58. As my phrasing indicates, this is compatible with acknowledging that victims can sometimes have duties to resist their own oppression, as Vasanthakumar, "Recent Debates," suggests.

59. I am assuming, with Howard, "Dangerous Speech," 243–47, that it can be permissible to impose costs on people to which they are not liable. In these cases, the costs are said to be *widely* proportionate ("Dangerous Speech," 212).

e.g., through complicity in wrongdoing or (to a lesser extent) failure to discharge humanitarian duties. Thus, considerations of liability can further strengthen the case for deploying non-transparent mobilizing falsehoods, at least when these falsehoods target liable audiences.

Yet, a defense of deceptive mobilization should not stop here. An obvious difficulty is that real-world mobilizers' audiences are often mixed, such that they include a combination of wrongdoers, bystanders, and victims. So, even if some members of a mobilizers' audience are liable to bear significant costs, others may not be. This does not necessarily imply that deceptive mobilization is disproportionate, and therefore impermissible, in these cases: as explained above, imposing these costs could still be a justified lesser evil. But whether this is true will once more depend on whether deception's instrumental benefits for justice sufficiently outweigh its moral costs. And, as mentioned in Section IV.A, whether *that* is true depends partly on how significant these moral costs are. To make greater space for non-transparent mobilizing falsehoods, therefore, I now wish to show that it is possible to mitigate the costs associated with deceptive mobilization.

IV.C. Mitigating the Costs of Mobilizing Falsehoods

My strategy for doing so comes in two parts. I will show, first, that some types of non-transparent mobilizing falsehood are less deceptive than others (Section IV.C.1.); and, second, that the moral costs associated with non-transparent mobilizing falsehoods are less grave than they initially appear when considered from a broader, systemic, perspective (Section IV.C.2.).

IV.C.1. Types of Mobilizing Falsehoods

The category of non-transparent mobilizing falsehoods is internally diverse. Some members of this category, though deceptive, seem meaningfully *less* deceptive (and therefore, easier to justify) than others. Here, I wish to highlight two such subcategories.

The first is the category of *self-effacing* falsehoods. In some cases, a mobilizer deploys a falsehood in order to cause their audience to form a false belief. But this act of deception is itself intended to make the false belief become true further down the line. Imagine, for example, a speaker who, in a polarized political setting, aims to facilitate the reconciliation of two mutually antagonistic groups and knows that doing so

requires mobilizing one group to make the first step. Accordingly, she falsely tells group B that group A are trustworthy. The resulting false belief motivates group B to extend trust to group A, perhaps by foregoing antagonistic political tactics in a way that makes them vulnerable to group A.[60] Now, as Philip Pettit has argued, the act of extending trust can itself help generate trustworthiness; because extending trust to someone typically communicates esteem for them, doing so can give the trustee a powerful new reason to act trustworthily.[61] Thus, group A may *become* trustworthy—and the false belief in their trustworthiness may, consequently, become true.

A case like this still involves deception: the speaker mobilizes group B by deliberately causing them to form a false belief. But, when it succeeds, it is a *self-effacing* form of deception. The false belief it induces turns into, and is intended by the speaker to turn into, a true belief. Consequently, the moral costs associated with self-effacing falsehoods seem meaningfully less severe than the costs associated with other forms of deception.

This is clearest when considering deception's autonomy-related costs. Self-effacing falsehoods can of course involve real costs to autonomy. For one thing, getting group B to form false beliefs about group A's trustworthiness arguably impairs their capacity for rational self-direction (notably, by making them less capable of safely anticipating possible untrustworthy behavior from group A). Relatedly, one might worry that deceiving group B into extending trust toward group A involves using them as mere means for increasing societal trust. Nevertheless, the fact that the falsehood is intended to be self-effacing makes these autonomy-related worries less significant than they would otherwise be. The self-effacing falsehood's negative impact on its audience's capacity for rational self-direction is bounded in time, as it will disappear when the falsehood ceases to be false. And even if members of group B *are* used as mere means to some degree, the fact that this use is intended to be temporary (as the falsehood is intended to become true) makes it intuitively less disrespectful of their status as autonomous agents than it might otherwise be.

60. For the view that trust involves voluntarily making oneself vulnerable to others, see Philip Pettit, "The Cunning of Trust," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 24 (1995): 28.

61. Ibid.

A similar observation applies to a second category of non-transparent falsehoods, namely *educational* falsehoods. Unlike self-effacing falsehoods, educational falsehoods do not become true as a result of being communicated. Rather, educational falsehoods are claims which, though false, nonetheless have an educational effect. Believing these falsehoods can help one appreciate something true that one would otherwise not have appreciated. One might read Douglass's intervention in this way. It promotes a false belief about the Founders—that, due to their commitment to liberty, they rejected "slavery and oppression." But that false belief itself can promote greater epistemic access to certain facts: for example, the fact that a true commitment to liberty entails an absolute rejection of slavery.

Not all falsehoods that mobilize toward justice come with such countervailing epistemic benefits. Suppose a mobilizer's audience *already* recognizes the deep wrongness of a given injustice, but are too fearful to mobilize, because they perceive—accurately—that taking action would expose them to meaningful risks of harm. If the mobilizer responds by simply downplaying these risks, this may succeed in getting the audience to act. But, by contrast with the previous case, it will do so without clear countervailing epistemic benefits. The audience, after all, already recognizes the injustice in question; and the falsehood worsens, rather than improves, their perception of the risks to which they are exposed.[62]

Like self-effacing falsehoods, educational falsehoods are deceptive; as I am defining this category, the speaker who deploys an educational falsehood intends to induce a false belief. However, the educational effects associated with this false belief help alleviate the costs normally associated with deception.

Here too, this is clearest with deception's autonomy-related costs. In some cases, the epistemic benefits associated with educational falsehoods are sufficiently great that their overall epistemic impact is positive. Insofar as autonomous self-direction depends on one's epistemic situation, a non-transparent falsehood that thus improves one's overall epistemic situation could, by the same token, help one direct

62. Some might be tempted to say, in this case, that the falsehood helps them form the true belief *that they are morally required to take action*. But one can imagine a case where the audience already hold this belief, but remain unwilling to act accordingly due to the risks involved.

oneself in accordance with one's goals and values. For example, if, as I suggested above, Douglass's idealization of the Founders helps his audience form more accurate beliefs about the demands of liberty, this idealization can bolster their ability to identify courses of action that are consonant with their own commitment to liberty.[63] This observation also alleviates the worry that deception disrespects people's autonomy by treating them as mere means: insofar as educational mobilizing falsehoods place people in a better epistemic position, and thus empower them to pursue their own goals or values, it seems implausible to say that they treat people as mere means or tools.[64]

The point is not that these two subcategories of non-transparent mobilizing falsehoods are costless. Nor is it that *only* these subcategories of mobilizing falsehoods are justifiable. Rather, the point is that the moral worries they generate (particularly those relating to autonomy) are plausibly less severe than those inflicted by standard forms of deception. Accordingly, such mobilizing falsehoods, though deceptive, seem more likely to be proportionate—and by extension, easier to justify—than other forms of mobilizing deception.

IV.C.2. The Systemic Integration of Mobilizing Falsehoods

The previous section sought to alleviate concerns about the proportionality of the costs associated with non-transparent mobilizing falsehoods by zooming in to specific subspecies of such falsehoods. The present section instead takes a step back, and considers the apparent costs of these falsehoods from a "systemic" perspective.

63. The fact that one is *deceived* into occupying a better epistemic position might still seem pro tanto bad for autonomy. But even so, the reasons outlined above suggest that educational falsehoods are *less* problematic from the standpoint of autonomy than other non-transparent falsehoods.

64. How the notion of *treating another merely as a means* should be understood is of course contested. But the above claim is compatible with at least two influential understandings of this notion. First, the "end sharing" account: those who are deceived by an educational falsehood can conceivably share the deceiver's proximate end of improving their epistemic position. Second, the "possible consent" account: it seems possible rationally to consent to being deceived in contexts where this would improve one's overall epistemic position. On the possibility of consent to deception more generally, see Carson, *Deception*, 82–83. See also Samuel Kerstein, "Treating Persons as Means," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2019, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/persons-means/, for discussion of these interpretations.

The "systemic turn" in democratic theory contends that democratic decision-making is best conceived as a system composed of many different parts. In particular, the democratic system involves many different agents speaking and acting in different arenas and institutions, which may perform different functions. This approach further suggests that, when evaluating parts of the democratic system, we should consider not only how they operate when taken independently, but also how they contribute to and interact with the broader democratic system. This matters, as Jane Mansbridge emphasizes, because a part that fails to realize a value when considered independently may nonetheless contribute to realizing that value at the broader, systemic, level.[65]

Adopting this systemic perspective helps mitigate the costs associated with deceptive mobilizing falsehoods. While the previous section focused on alleviating their autonomy-related costs, my argument here will focus predominantly on their democratic costs.

A core implication of the systemic approach is that a part of the system can be internally undemocratic, yet still contribute to making the broader system more democratic overall. Consider, by way of analogy, the case of political parties. As Samuel Bagg and Udit Bhatia have argued, internally undemocratic parties can help promote more competitive elections, which in turn contributes to preventing the capture of policy-making by special interest groups and thus facilitates more democratically accountable government.[66]

A similar analysis applies to non-transparent mobilizing falsehoods. If we look exclusively at the mobilizer and those whom they mobilize, the practice of deploying such falsehoods may seem problematic from a democratic perspective. Democracy requires that power be exercised in a way that is accountable to those who are subjected to it, in the sense of being forced to track their interests and concerns. And contestation, recall, is a key mechanism for holding exercises of power accountable. Yet, as Section II discussed, one might worry that the effectiveness of deceptive mobilizing falsehoods requires *not* contesting these falsehoods, so as not

65. See Jane Mansbridge et al., "A Systemic Approach to Deliberative Democracy," in *Deliberative Systems*, ed. John Parkinson and Jane Mansbridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

66. Samuel Bagg and Udit Bhatia, "Intra-Party Democracy: A Functionalist Account," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 30, no. 3 (2022): 347–48.

to undermine belief in them.[67] If this is correct, maintaining the effectiveness of mobilizing falsehoods seemingly requires us to forego a key mechanism for ensuring that mobilizers deploy falsehoods, and thereby influence their audience, in an accountable manner.

But even if this worry is well-founded—and so, even if deceptive mobilizers end up exercising unaccountable power over those whom they mobilize—the practice of deploying non-transparent mobilizing falsehoods can nonetheless enhance democratic accountability at the broader systemic level.

Why might this be? In recent years, democratic theorists have influentially argued that democratic accountability requires organized countervailing power.[68] The idea, simply put, is that contesting the actions of

67. A further worry is that, in addition to undermining the falsehood's effectiveness at mobilizing the audience, contestation could also undermine the perceived legitimacy or trustworthiness of mobilizers who are exposed as having deployed falsehoods. Accordingly, deploying falsehoods that will be subject to democratic contestation could actively hinder the just cause in question. This is an important concern. But there are at least two things to say in response. An initial reply, which I explore below, is that the false beliefs induced by mobilizing falsehoods can be "sticky," or difficult to undermine. This stickiness reduces the likelihood that contestation will successfully expose the mobilizer as having deployed falsehoods—at least, as I explain below, if they exercise appropriate restraint when assessing how much to deviate from the truth. Second, even in cases where contestation does successfully expose the falsehoods as false, the worry at hand does not apply equally to all mobilizing falsehoods. This is because the extent to which finding out that one has been deceived is likely to undermine one's trust in the deceiver depends importantly on the precise justification underpinning the deception—and, relatedly, on how compelling that justification is likely to seem to those who are deceived. Suppose, for example, that a falsehood mobilizes me by helping me appreciate something true about the world. I argued, in Section IV.C.1, that such "educational" falsehoods do not treat their audience as a mere means to another's ends, but rather empower them to pursue their own ends. Accordingly, finding out that a mobilizer deceived me in this manner seems considerably less likely negatively to affect my judgment of, or trust in, the mobilizer (compared, say, to finding out that they deceptively mobilized me in a way that *did* treat me as a mere means). Indeed, given its underlying justification, and the way in which it respects my autonomy, I might well reflexively endorse the decision to deploy this falsehood. The broader point is this. The fact that a falsehood possesses a comparatively strong moral justification often makes it easier, other things being equal, for a mobilizer persuasively to defend its deployment if it is exposed by democratic contestation. So, the falsehoods that I have argued are most justifiable—such as educational or self-effacing falsehoods—seem less vulnerable to the worry in question.

68. The terminology of "organized countervailing power" is Samuel Bagg's ("Do we need an anti-oligarchic constitution?," *European Journal of Political Theory* 21, no. 2 (2022): 399). See also Jeffrey Stout, *Blessed are the Organized* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 74, Bagg and Bhatia, "Intra-Party Democracy," 348, and Steven Klein, "Democracy Requires Organized Collective Power," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 30 (2022): 26–47.

powerful elites and decision-makers, and thus holding them accountable, is more likely to be effective when one wields meaningful power. But building this "countervailing" power is often arduous. In non-ideal conditions, it often requires bringing together a disparate group of people and somehow mobilizing them—despite low odds of success and high costs of participation—to act collectively in pursuit of a political goal.

This highlights the democratic value of mobilizing falsehoods. Insofar as a non-transparent falsehood helps to mobilize the group in question—perhaps by exaggerating its odds of success or by holding up an idealized exemplar—it helps to build the necessary countervailing power. Consider, for example, a labor organizer who mobilizes workers by exaggerating the odds of success associated with industrial action. To the extent that this misrepresentation helps mobilize the group, deploying this falsehood can increase their collective power to contest the decisions of their employers, or of legislators, and thus to check these powerful agents' decisions.

My argument so far has conceded for the sake of argument that the effectiveness of non-transparent mobilizing falsehoods may depend, as the worry outlined in Section II suggested, on their not being subjected to contestation by other speakers. And I have argued that, even if one grants this claim, and even if one assumes that mobilizing falsehoods are therefore not subjected to public contestation, it does not necessarily follow that the practice of deploying mobilizing falsehoods is all-things-considered bad from the perspective of democratic accountability. Even if the deceptive mobilizer is not held accountable to those whom they mobilize (because other speakers refrain from contesting the falsehoods they deploy), their deceptive mobilization can help constitute countervailing power—and, by extension, can help contest the actions of other powerful forces within the broader democratic system.

Yet this initial response to the "democratic accountability" worry does not go far enough, for two reasons. The first reason focuses on the value of democratic accountability. Even if non-transparent mobilizing falsehoods help promote democratic accountability at the systemic level, it might still seem deeply undesirable for mobilizers not to be held accountable, via contestatory processes, to those whom they mobilize. This, one might think, leaves them with too much unchecked power over their audience. The second reason relates to effectiveness. If mobilizing falsehoods'

effectiveness depends on other speakers in the democratic system actually refraining from contesting what they say, then, in practice, their effectiveness seems likely to be precarious.

To alleviate both concerns, I now wish to challenge the claim that a mobilizer's non-transparent falsehoods cannot be effective if they are subjected to public contestation by other speakers within the democratic system. Subjecting falsehoods to contestation *can* lead people to stop believing them. However, there is no guarantee that this will happen. Take Douglass's idealized representation of the Founders. While Douglass misrepresented the Founders to tap into the motivational reservoir associated with them, other abolitionists, such as William Lloyd Garrison, severely critiqued this misrepresentation, and condemned the Founders for their toleration of slavery.[69] But awareness of these Garrisonian critiques would not necessarily have led Douglass's listeners to abandon his idealized characterization of the Founders.

Indeed, there are many reasons why people might maintain a false belief despite being presented with contradictory evidence. They may, for instance, have previously been exposed to misinformation that supports the false belief—and this misinformation may seem to outweigh the contradictory evidence that is currently on offer. Or their identity may be bound up with the false belief, such that they are reluctant to abandon it.[70] Whatever the specific reason, the upshot is that people often display some degree of dogmatism—that is, they are disposed to maintain beliefs longer than is epistemically warranted. So, from the fact that a non-transparent mobilizing falsehood is subjected to democratic contestation, it does not follow that those who are exposed to this contestation will immediately stop believing the falsehood in question.

A critic might reply that this last point rescues the mobilizing force of non-transparent falsehoods, but only at the cost of depriving contestation of its intended value. After all, if the contestation of false beliefs fails to change minds, then one might worry that it fails to hold deceivers democratically accountable in a meaningful way.

69. McClure, "Oration," 430–33.

70. Dan Kahan, "The Politically Motivated Reasoning Paradigm, Part 1: What Politically Motivated Reasoning Is and How to Measure It," in *Emerging Trends in the Social and Behavioral Sciences : An Interdisciplinary, Searchable, and Linkable Resource* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2015).

Yet this rejoinder is too quick. Contestation can contribute to holding purveyors of (mobilizing) falsehoods accountable even in contexts where the audience is dogmatically attached to falsehoods. Indeed, even when it fails to correct the false beliefs induced by a mobilizer, this contestation plausibly sets constraints on how the mobilizer deviates from the truth. Consider that, in most cases, dogmatic resistance is not absolute; dogmatic commitment to a claim can usually be overcome when the evidence against this claim grows overwhelming. And, other things being equal, it seems easier to generate overwhelming evidence against gross deviations from the truth than from minor deviations. This suggests that public contestation can help check a mobilizer's use of deception; when deploying falsehoods, a mobilizer has an incentive to exercise restraint, and so to disseminate falsehoods that do not deviate excessively from the truth, if they wish their falsehoods to be believed.

For example, a labor organizer who makes the case for long and painful industrial action might exaggerate the odds of success to some degree, in order to inspire hope that the action is worth undertaking. But, to make their falsehoods more believable in the face of public challenges, they might refrain from going so far as to say (falsely) that achieving this success will be short and painless. Likewise, it is no accident that Douglass idealizes historical figures who, in other domains of their lives (namely, in the American Revolutionary struggle), *were* strongly committed to fighting for individual liberty. Doing so makes it prima facie plausible—though it is actually false—that they might have been strongly committed to opposing slavery.

This last argument might seem too complacent, particularly when one thinks of some of the falsehoods that permeate contemporary democratic politics. Some falsehoods—including some falsehoods that deviate enormously from the truth—seem, on the face of it, to be extremely resistant to counterevidence. Consider, for example, many of Donald Trump's egregious misrepresentations—such as the claim that undocumented immigrants are disproportionately criminals; that his inauguration crowd was the largest ever; or, most infamously, that the 2020 election was stolen from him. Or consider, likewise, gross misrepresentations concerning vaccine safety, such as the claim that vaccines cause autism. Although I am of course not defending these falsehoods (given my focus on mobilizing falsehoods that are directed at a just cause),[71] they might seem

71. See Section I.

problematic for my present argument: their apparent resistance to counterevidence might make one might doubt that subjection to contestation would really set meaningful constraints on what falsehoods just mobilizers deploy.

It is true that, in some cases, people are so dogmatically committed to a falsehood that, even though it deviates significantly from the truth, their false belief is nearly impervious to counterevidence. There is some evidence that belief in Trump's "Big Lie" about the 2020 election is like this; indeed, some evidence suggests that factually challenging this lie has no effect on Trump supporters' beliefs about the election.[72] But this worry should not be overstated. Even if some extreme cases are like this, recent empirical evidence suggests that many are not. That is, fact-checking commonly does succeed in correcting beliefs in blatant falsehoods—including many of Trump's political falsehoods, as well as vaccine-related falsehoods—even among political or social groups that are ideologically predisposed to believe these falsehoods.[73] Thus, resistance to counterevidence, though real,

72. Catie Bailard, Ethan Porter, Kimberly Gross, "Fact-checking Trump's election lies can improve confidence in U.S. Elections," *Harvard Kenndy School Misinformation Review* 3, no. 6 (2022): 1–64. But even here, the evidence remains mixed. For one thing, David Painter and Juliana Fernandes, "'The Big Lie': How Fact Checking Influences Support for Insurrection," *American Behavioral Scientist*, Online First (2022), 9, find tentative evidence that fact-checking Trump's "Big Lie" can increase Trump supporters' belief in the legitimacy of the 2020 election. For another, apparent resistance to counterevidence can sometimes be misleading. As Neil Levy, *Bad Beliefs: Why They Happen to Good People* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022) notes, some people who affirm blatant falsehoods (even after these have been contested) do so, not because they actually still believe these falsehoods, but rather in order to express support for their "team." This "expressive responding," he suggests, constitutes the best explanation for why some Trump supporters continued to say that Trump's inauguration crowd was larger than Obama's, even after being shown photographs clearly showing this to be false.

73. For evidence relating to the fact-checking of blatant political misinformation in the United States (including Trump-issued misinformation), see Thomas Wood and Ethan Porter, "The Elusive Backfire Effect," *Political Behavior* 41 (2019): 135–63, Alexander Coppock, Kimberly Gross, Ethan Porter, Emily Thorson, Thomas Wood, "Conceptual Replication of Four Key Findings about Factual Corrections and Misinformation during the 2020 US Election," *British Journal of Political Science* 53, no. 4 (2023): 1328–41, and Adam Berinsky, *Political Rumors* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), 115–16. For evidence relating to vaccine-related misinformation, see Jingwen Zhang, Jieyu Featherstone, Christopher Calabrese, Magdalena Wojcieszak, "Effects of fact-checking social media vaccine misinformation on attitudes towards vaccines," *Preventive Medicine* 145 (2021): 4, and Ullich Ecker, Stephan Lewandowsky, John Cook, Philipp Schmid, Lisa Fazio, Nadia Brashier, Panaoyiota Kendeou, Emily Vraga, and Michelle Amazeen, "The Psychological Drivers of Misinformation and its Resistance to Correction," *Nature Reviews* 1 (2022): 15.

is often capable of being surmounted by factual contestation. And, as a result, a mobilizer whose claims are likely to be contested often has an incentive to exercise restraint when determining which falsehoods to deploy—and, notably, how significantly to depart from the truth—if they want their audience to believe them.

Let us take stock. I have argued that subjecting mobilizing falsehoods to democratic contestation can impose meaningful checks or constraints on what falsehoods mobilizers deploy, *without* necessarily undermining belief in the falsehoods that they end up deploying. One can therefore consistently hold that mobilizing falsehoods should be subject to accountability-enhancing contestation by other speakers in the democratic system, without necessarily undermining the mobilizing efficacy of those falsehoods.

But another worry about mobilizing falsehoods' efficacy lurks in the vicinity. Even if subjecting mobilizing falsehoods to democratic contestation does not undermine the mobilizing force of *those* falsehoods, doing so might nonetheless come at an important opportunity cost for mobilizing. After all, the time and effort that other speakers in the democratic system spend contesting mobilizing falsehoods are time and effort they could otherwise have spent engaging in (non-deceptive) mobilizing efforts of their own.

There are two things to say in response. The first is that other speakers may not need to spend significant energy *actually* contesting mobilizing falsehoods. Often, their mere presence and willingness to contest mobilizing falsehoods may suffice. This is because the mere possibility that mobilizers' claims will be contested can give them an incentive to exercise restraint when disseminating falsehoods. Second, even when speakers do spend time and effort contesting other mobilizers' falsehoods, this needn't always distract from their own mobilizing activities. On the contrary, such contestation can be part and parcel of their own mobilizing efforts. Critiquing Douglass's idealized representation of the Founders, for example, could plausibly serve Garrison's mobilizing aims. Exposing the Founders' ties to slavery might help Garrison convey, as he in fact sought to do, that slavery was deeply rooted in American political institutions (most notably, the Constitution), and thereby mobilize action against these slavery-upholding institutions.[74]

74. Ronald Osborn, "William Lloyd Garrison and the United States Constitution," *Journal of Law and Religion* 24, no. 1 (2008): 80–83.

One might worry, however, that attempting to mobilize political action *by* critiquing falsehoods deployed by other mobilizers within one's movement risks undermining the movement's ability to present a united front. If Garrison critiques Douglass's idealized representation, for instance, this will make the abolitionist movement seem fractured rather than united.

Yet this needn't be exceedingly problematic. One reason is that presenting a genuinely united front may not be a realistic option to begin with. Mobilizing different audiences, who possess radically divergent beliefs and motivations, in the service of a particular cause often requires deploying different and mutually contradictory messages. As McClure notes, a rhetorical strategy of blaming the Founders for slavery would likely have fallen flat among the many Americans who revered the Founders.[75] Conversely, linking the Founders to abolitionism, as Douglass does, is unlikely to move those who are convinced of the Founders' complicity with slavery. In a situation such as this one, mobilizing *both* groups may require deploying messages that contradict each other, so that the movement as a whole fails to present a robustly united front.

Nor is this necessarily regrettable. The appearance of internal disagreement can, after all, be strategically useful. This is, in part, because the contrast between disagreeing factions can make some of these factions appear more palatable to outside groups than they otherwise would. According to Ronald Osborn, for instance, Garrison's radical critique of slavery, which refused to idealize the Founders and the Constitution they created, enabled other critiques of slavery, such as Douglass's, to appear more moderate and acceptable to the mainstream by comparison.[76] The point is that, even when it is possible to present a united front, doing so is not always strategically preferable. Hence, even if subjecting mobilizing falsehoods to accountability-enhancing contestation does undermine a movement's appearance of unity, this needn't undermine its mobilizing efficacy.

V. CONCLUSION

Is it always wrong to deploy falsehoods in order to mobilize a group in the service of a just cause? I have argued against this view, and, in the course

75. McClure, *Oration*, 431.

76. Osborn, "Garrison," 83. Lewis Baldwin, "Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr.: What They Thought About Each Other," *Islamic Studies* 25, 4 (1986): 398, highlights a similar dynamic when discussing King and Malcolm X's relationship.

of doing so, have sought to clarify the conditions in which it is permissible to deploy such falsehoods.

The first reason for thinking that deploying mobilizing falsehoods is sometimes permissible is that these falsehoods can be transparently false, such that deploying them is not deceptive. Some falsehoods, though they superficially seem to be making a representational claim, are intended to work differently. As I have shown, for instance, their purpose might instead be to express a motivationally efficacious attitude, and thereby activate it in others, or even to construct new political identities that facilitate just mobilization. Moreover, some falsehoods do aim to mobilize by representing real features of the world, but—like the falsehoods embedded in scientific models—they fulfill this representational function without purporting to be true.

It might be tempting to leave things here, and to suggest that mobilizing falsehoods are permissible when, but *only* when, they are transparently false. But my second line of argument suggests that doing so would be too restrictive. In non-ideal conditions, some highly potent mobilizing falsehoods require for their success that the audience believe them. And so, they require some measure of non-transparency. In Section III.B, for example, I argued that translating the powerful admiration many Americans felt for the Founders into anti-slavery mobilization required intentionally misrepresenting them in a way that was not transparent to the audience. Foregoing non-transparent mobilizing falsehoods altogether, on the grounds that they are deceptive, would therefore mean sacrificing powerful tools for mobilizing action.

The permissibility of deploying deceptive mobilizing falsehoods is nonetheless subject to important constraints. Many of these constraints are aimed at ensuring that the moral costs associated with deceptive mobilization are proportionate. Their proportionality notably depends, as discussed, on mobilizers deploying falsehoods in the service of a weighty just cause. Moreover, mobilizers are required to take steps to mitigate the moral costs associated with their deception, particularly when, as will often be the case, some members of their audience will foreseeably not be liable to bear significant moral costs in pursuit of this cause. These steps include selecting less autonomy-impairing forms of deception (e.g., educational or self-effacing mobilizing falsehoods) where these are available, as well as ensuring that the falsehoods are deployed in a broader democratic system where other speakers are free to contest the mobilizer's claims.

Although my discussion has focused principally on showing that the moral costs associated with deceptive mobilizing falsehoods could be proportionate, deceptive mobilizing is also constrained by a necessity condition. That is, it must be the case that the moral costs associated with this deception are not unnecessary. And so, it must be the case that non-transparent falsehoods help generate some mobilizing force that the speaker plausibly could not generate without it.

This last condition is demanding. Yet, I have offered reasons for thinking that it commonly applies in non-ideal circumstances. Some of these relate to the difficulty of political action. When the personal costs of taking action are substantial, or the odds of political success are low—as is often the case in non-ideal contexts—accurately representing the situation may dampen our willingness to take action.[77] Other reasons relate to exemplars. A characteristic feature of non-ideal conditions is that people often feel most strongly connected to, and most strongly motivated to emulate, people whose conduct was in fact immoral or unjust. In such contexts, harnessing this vast motivational reservoir in the service of a just cause thus often requires misrepresenting these exemplars.[78] The significance of these considerations is amplified, moreover, when other mobilizers—including mobilizers pursuing an unjust cause—are already using deception. If deceptive falsehoods provide distinctive mobilizing advantages, refraining from using them risks placing just mobilizers at a significant strategic disadvantage relative to unjust mobilizers who do. In these circumstances, deploying non-transparent falsehoods might thus be needed for mobilizers effectively to advance their just cause.[79]

Still, even if the foregoing constraints on permissibility can often be satisfied, at least in non-ideal circumstances, determining when these constraints are satisfied is difficult. Consequently, one might worry that mobilizers are likely to misuse mobilizing falsehoods. In light of this risk, one might conclude that, as a rule, speakers should refrain from deploying non-transparent mobilizing falsehoods altogether.

Yet this conclusion is too hasty. Indeed, an absolute prohibition on mobilizing falsehoods seems intuitively too restrictive. Douglass's idealization of the Founders, for example, seems a justly celebrated example of

77. See Section I.
78. See Section III.B.
79. See Section II.

political mobilizing, even if it is understood (as I have suggested it should be) as a non-transparent falsehood. But once we concede that it is permissible to deploy at least some (non-transparent) mobilizing falsehoods, such as Douglass's, we need a standard for distinguishing those whose deployment is permissible from those whose deployment is not. The parameters articulated in this article aim to provide just such a standard. Specifically, my account yields practical guidance for political mobilizing in non-ideal democracies by highlighting how the permissibility of deploying a mobilizing falsehood depends on its audience, on the particular type of falsehood in question, and on the broader discursive context in which it is embedded. And, crucially, it demonstrates that, contrary to what one might expect, defending the deployment of these controversial falsehoods does not necessarily mean giving up on the democratic contestation that is so crucial to democratic accountability.

NOTES ON THE CONTRIBUTOR

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