

# On Common Knowledge and *Ad Populum*: Acceptance as Grounds for Acceptability\*

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**ABSTRACT:** Typically, common knowledge is taken as grounds for the acceptability of a claim, while appeals to popularity are seen as fallacious attempts to support a claim. This paper poses the question of whether there is any categorical difference between appeals to common knowledge and appeals to popular opinion as argumentative moves. In answering this question, I argue that appeals to common knowledge do not, on their own, provide adequate grounds for a claim's acceptability.

**KEYWORDS:** *ad populum*; appeal to popularity; acceptability, grounds for; bandwagon argument; bandwagon fallacy; common knowledge; fallacy; knowledge; premise acceptability; Walton, Douglas

## STARTING POINTS FOR ARGUMENTATION

All reasoning, including the reasoning used in argument, has to start from somewhere. Although it may be possible, in principle, to offer support for every claim, in any particular case this strategy cannot be used without hopeless regress. Thus, not every claim used in reasoning can owe its acceptability to some set of reasons offered in its support. Instead, in the context of any given argument or piece of reasoning, some claims must be accepted—if only as starting places—on some other basis. These claims can be called the basic premises of an argument.<sup>1</sup>

Dialogic approaches to argumentation typically take as the starting place of argumentation the discussants' shared commitments. Alternately, rhetorical approaches standardly take as the starting place of argumentation the audience's existing commitment set or, more broadly, whatever an audience is willing to accept. With each approach the idea seems to be that the effectiveness of persuasion depends on the commitment of the audience to the starting

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<sup>1</sup> For the remainder of the article I will speak only of argument and argumentation, though I take it that analogous considerations apply in the situation of reasoning.

points of argumentation. In a dialogic context, if there are no points of agreement between a proponent and opponent, there is nothing for arguers to “take hold of” when designing and deploying their arguments and no space in which argumentation can take place. In reasoning more generally, if no claims are initially admitted, there is nothing from which inferences can be drawn, for inference can only generate claims on the basis of other claims. Further, there may even be nothing with which to draw inferences, for if no inferential rules are initially accepted, there will be no inferential moves that can be made even given some initial data set. In these approaches the fact of acceptance (or agreement) seems to give a *prima facie* acceptability to a set of claims (which I will call an initial commitment set) used as a starting place for argumentation.

As a starting place for argumentation, an initial commitment set can include both good and bad information. More generally, we tend to hold that most of our commitments are fallible—they are subject to defeat as refuting evidence comes to light. As such, some claims in an initial commitment set might be unacceptable according to any relevant standard of acceptance. The hope is that the projects of inquiry, argumentation, critical examination, and rational assessment will help sort things out by weeding out the bad claims in the initial commitment set. So, that some claim is accepted by an arguer is a reason for it to be a starting place in argumentation, although it is not on its own a reason (even a *prima facie* reason) for its acceptability. Rather, the acceptability of a claim is determined by how well it survives the process of argumentation, not where it stands at the beginning.

In this article I explore the role acceptance can play in establishing the acceptability of a claim by examining the relationship between appeals to common knowledge and appeals to popular opinion. Typically, that a claim is common knowledge is taken as grounds for its acceptability, whereas appeals to popular opinion are seen as fallacious attempts to support a claim. Against this I argue that appeals to common knowledge generally provide no better evidence for a claim than appeals to popular opinion and, as such, that appeals to common knowledge ought to be just as successful—or unsuccessful—as appeals *ad populum*.

I begin by describing a standard account of appeals to common knowledge and popular opinion that should be familiar to anyone who has taught or studied reasoning skills. I proceed to set out an alternative to this standard view (largely due to Douglas Walton) on which some appeals to popularity can provide defeasible yet presumptive support to a claim sufficient to shift a burden of proof on the balance of considerations. In general, I hold that the standard account is correct and that where *ad populum* appeals succeed in providing good reasons, they do so because they have been reconstructed as having another argument form that introduces independent reasons for accepting the conclusion. Each of these accounts helps to frame the question of how common knowledge appeals can be distinguished from appeals to popular opinion as argument moves. After considering a number of alternatives, I propose a distinguishing feature and proceed to examine the actual argumentative role of appeals to common knowledge by examining their evidentiary content. It is here that I make the case for my thesis that appeals to common knowledge, on their own, provide no better reason for the acceptability of a claim than do appeals to popular opinion.

## A STANDARD TREATMENT

A standard view in the argumentation literature (both theoretical and pedagogical) is that common knowledge generally provides good grounds for the acceptability of a claim, whereas

popular opinion does not. Indeed, appeals to popular opinion are commonly classified as fallacious. The appeal of this standard treatment seems to be easily explained.

### *The Idea of Common Knowledge*

At an intuitive, pre-theoretic, commonsense level, the idea of common knowledge seems to make a lot of sense.<sup>2</sup> Some of the things that we accept seem so obvious that they hardly seem to stand in need of any explicit justification and doubting them seems futile. Indeed, we feel as certain about some common knowledge claims as we do about claims that are genuine a priori truths. Compare “there are trees in forests” and “there are trees in Canada.” Were we wrong about claims of the “grass is green”/“water is wet” variety, it would almost seem to indicate our failure to grasp the meanings of the terms in them, rather than any error in judgment. Similarly our assent to claims like “you can’t be in two places at once,” “it snows in the Arctic,” and “birds fly” occurs after only a moment’s reflection and without any special tests concerning the state of things in the world.<sup>3</sup>

These are the claims about which we feel so confident that we cannot really imagine what it would be like to be wrong about them. Imagine the cognitive adjustments that would be required if I somehow discovered that I was wrong in my belief that “Canada generally lies to the north of the United States.” Not only would all the maps that I am familiar with be wrong, but I would have to reconsider what the president really means when he talks of “America’s close friends to the north,” and I would have to reevaluate where all my friends who “go south for the winter” really go for their holidays. That is, not only would I have to explain how I went so badly wrong on such a seemingly basic point, but I would also have to explain how everyone else went so badly wrong as well.

Not only do such claims seem obviously true to us, but our confidence is reinforced when we see that belief in them is shared by all our peers. There are, it seems, some things that we can just take for granted. Although some of our beliefs can be traced to unique and specific origins, and have singular paths of justification behind them, many of our beliefs are known on the basis of many different sources, far too numerous to track, and are constantly confirmed by our

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<sup>2</sup> Because this article is concerned with appeals to common knowledge as a reason-giving move for some claim in an argument, considerations of knowledge are restricted to cases of propositional knowledge (knowledge that *p*), as opposed to procedural knowledge (knowing how to *a*, where *a* is some activity or action) or direct knowledge (knowing *o*, where *o* is some object). Further, the idea of common knowledge discussed herein is different from the notion first introduced by Lewis (1969, 52–57), which is characterized by a hierarchical knowledge relation whereby some subject knows that some other subject knows (that some other subject knows etc.) that *p*. As discussed here, the idea is closer to that of *mutual knowledge*, whereby several agents know that *p*.

The ideas of a *common knowledge claim* and an *appeal to common knowledge* should be distinguished from one another. A common knowledge claim is simply a statement that is classified as common knowledge by an arguer. An appeal to common knowledge, by contrast, is a move in argument where the assertion that some claim is a matter of common knowledge is used as a reason to support that claim or establish it as acceptable.

<sup>3</sup> Importantly, the general claims in this list are not universally true without exception; rather, they are generally true under normal circumstances. When assenting to these claims we, as part of our judgment, imagine, or associate with the claim being judged, a normal circumstance. For example, we assume that the grass has not been burned brown by the sun and that the water is not frozen. As Walton and Macagno write of the “birds fly” example, “The common knowledge is the generalization that birds of the common sort we are familiar with, generally fly” (2005b, 5). Indeed, according to Walton (2001, 107) and Walton and Macagno (2005b), this type of defeasibility is a characteristic feature of common knowledge.

experience and the testimony of others. Such beliefs are not just cognitively entrenched in our own minds, they are socially entrenched in the minds of all those around us.

Perhaps as a result of considerations like these, Govier has claimed that common knowledge serves as a criterion of premise acceptability: “A premise in an argument is acceptable if it is a matter of **common knowledge**. That is to say, if the premise states something that is known by virtually everyone, it should be allowed as an acceptable premise. Or, if a premise is widely believed, and there is no widely known evidence against it, it is often appropriate to allow it as acceptable. Society operates on the basis of many statements that people know or believe as a common ground for communication and cooperation” (2005, 136). Similarly, Johnson and Blair write that “it is reasonable to accept an undefended premise if it is generally known to be true, or at least represents knowledge shared, and known to be shared, by the arguer and the audience” (1993, 63). So, that we would categorize a claim as common knowledge can act as a criterion for premise acceptability.<sup>4</sup>

In summary, a standard account of common knowledge is that it is a body of broadly accepted and generally acceptable knowledge, and in the absence of special evidence against it, that a claim is a matter of common knowledge can serve as grounds for the acceptability of that claim, at least in a *prima facie* manner. It might seem, then, that it is the general acceptance of common knowledge that accounts for the argumentative goodness of appeals to common knowledge.

### *The Fallaciousness of Popular Opinion*

In contrast to common knowledge, popular opinion is typically seen as failing to confer acceptability on claims.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, standard accounts classify appeals to popular opinion as fallacious. As Damer defines it, the fallacy of appeal to popular opinion “consists in urging the acceptance of a position simply on the grounds that most or at least great numbers of people accept it” (1987 124; cf. Walton 1999, 83).<sup>6</sup> In explaining the fallaciousness of *ad populum* appeals, Woods, Irvine, and Walton consider the argument form

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<sup>4</sup> It would be interesting to know whether Govier and Johnson and Blair take common knowledge as a mark of acceptability or as a reason establishing acceptability.

<sup>5</sup> It is commonly observed (e.g., Freeman 1995, 265–66; Walton 1992, ch. 3, 1999, ch. 3) that *appeal to popular opinion* ambiguously indicates at least two different argumentative moves. The first identifies appeal to popular opinion as either “mob appeal” or “snob appeal” and describes it as a species of appeal to emotion. The second identifies appeal to popular opinion as a kind of bandwagon argument and describes it as an attempt to justify a claim on the basis of its acceptance by a certain population. In this article I am only interested in the latter kind of argument, which Walton (1999, 98–100) calls *argument from popularity*. For brevity, discussion of this argument type is limited to its positive form (see Walton 1999, 223–24).

Also excluded from consideration here are opinion polling-type arguments that tend to deal with measuring and reporting on public opinion. Though Walton (1999) considers these under the rubric of *argumentum ad populum*, they do not have the form of the bandwagon argument discussed below. Instead, the form of such arguments appears to be something like this: (*Polls indicate that*) *the majority believe p*, therefore *majority opinion (or prevailing opinion) is p*.

<sup>6</sup> This account of the fallaciousness of appeals *ad populum* echoes that given in Arnauld’s 1662 *Port Royal Logic*, which (Walton 1999, 62) marks as the first recorded treatment of arguments of this type as generally fallacious. Arnauld writes: “People often consider only the number of witnesses, without thinking about whether the number makes it more probable that they have discovered the truth. This is not reasonable. As a modern author [Descartes] has wisely observed, in difficult matters where each person has to find his own way, it is more likely that a single

Everyone believes  $p$   
Therefore,  $p$  is true,

claiming that it “clearly confuses popularity with truth” (2004, 36–37).<sup>7</sup> They proceed to illustrate that even in instances where both the premise and the conclusion are true, the argument itself would remain bad because the truth of  $p$  is not established as a result of the premise.

Similarly, Govier writes: “Popularity is not good evidence . . . for truth. . . . A claim may be widely believed only because it is a common prejudice. Thus, the fact that it is widely believed is irrelevant to its rational acceptability” (2005, 187). Although there is some disagreement concerning the nature of the problem with arguments of this form—Govier (2005, 187) classifies their mistake as a failure of relevance, and Freeman (1995, 266–67) claims that they are failures of sufficiency<sup>8</sup>—there is a broad consensus that they are fallacious. By contrast, inferences of the form

Everyone knows that  $p$   
Therefore,  $p$  is true

are deductively valid on standard accounts of knowledge, according to which knowledge is, to use Zagzebski’s phrase, “true belief plus something else” (1999, 93).<sup>9</sup>

### *Refining the Standard Form*

Before proceeding to consider alternative accounts to the standard one, an important refinement to the standard form of appeals to common knowledge and popular opinion should be

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individual will find the truth than that several will discover it. Thus it is not a good inference to argue: Such-and-such an opinion is accepted by the majority of philosophers, therefore it is the truest” (Arnauld and Nicole 1996, 221). For a thorough discussion of the history of the standard treatment of the *argumentum ad populum*, see Walton 1999, ch. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Several alternatives to this basic form are considered by Walton (1999, ch. 3), including appeal to a majority, appeal to common folks, appeal to a group or the masses, and statistical syllogism, though in the end Walton (1999, 223–24) still opts for a pair of basic schemes in which the premise asserts universal acceptance. The difference is that the *pop scheme* identifies a reference group in which there is universal acceptance whereas the *argument from popularity* does not identify such a reference group.

Weaker versions of this type of argument might use premises of the form *The majority believes  $p$*  or *A preponderance of people (but perhaps not a majority) believe  $p$*  (cf. Walton 1999, 27). Faults similar to those discussed below apply to these weaker versions.

<sup>8</sup> Freeman also cites Johnson and Blair (1993, 161) and Kahane (1980, 37) as sharing this view. The dispute concerning the nature of the failure of appeals to popular opinion can be found throughout the treatment as fallacious in the historical literature (see Walton 1999, ch. 3).

<sup>9</sup> With Zagzebski (1999, 93), I take it that this conception of knowledge is widespread and commonly accepted among epistemologists. In this article I neither defend nor give any reasons for the acceptability of such a conception. See below for a further discussion of standard accounts of what that “something else” might be. Nothing in the argument of the article hinges on the specific nature of the belief component of the standard account of knowledge; theorists preferring the language of commitment or acceptance are welcome to read “belief” in these terms.

made. Intuitively, the premise of such appeals—everyone knows/believes that  $p$ —seems unlikely to ever be satisfied in any population whose sheer numbers might offer rhetorical or probative weight to the conclusion. Yet the failure of the *ad populum* appeal is not explained by the unacceptability of its premise but, rather, by the fact that the premise, even if acceptable, somehow fails to adequately support the conclusion. By contrast, it is standardly held that there is nothing generally wrong with appeals to common knowledge; hence the premise should be of a generally acceptable form on a standard account. There seems, then, to be a problem with the basic model of these types of arguments.

That such a universal premise is never likely to be met also points to a more general feature about common knowledge. Common knowledge is the sort of thing that really ought to be specified in relation to a given population and also in relation to a given topic or subject matter. For example, what is common knowledge among chemists about chemistry could well be quite different than what firefighters, parliamentarians, or homemakers take to be common knowledge about chemistry. Here, even though firefighters might have some specialized knowledge of chemistry (e.g., concerning the combustibility of different substances), because chemists, and perhaps even chemistry students, have special training in, or a special knowledge of, their particular subject matter, what is common knowledge to them about that subject matter might not be common knowledge among nonchemists. Effectively, trained chemists are, or are becoming, experts in their field, and what is common knowledge among experts in a field is typically not common knowledge among laypeople. By the same token, when venturing beyond their own field of expertise, experts may fare no better than laypeople.

We might be tempted to think that there is such a thing as common knowledge in a general sense. That is, a body of knowledge that is generally known, for example, that in North America we drive on the right-hand side of the road. But here again we see that when assenting to such claims, in addition to assuming a normal circumstance (there are no lane closures; see n. 3), we also assume a normal population (people familiar with North American driving practices). Indeed, as it is used in law common knowledge requires only general rather than universal knowledge. As Walton and Macagno observe, “In practice, the scope of common knowledge for purposes of judicial notice may include facts so generally known within the community as not to be reasonably subject to dispute” (2005b, 11). Thus, the claim that (at the time of writing) the Chicago Cubs last won the World Series in 1908 would count as common knowledge, even though you or I might learn or justify this by looking it up.

In view of these considerations, the following revision to the basic form of appeals to common knowledge and popular opinion can be proposed:

*Basic form of appeal to popular opinion (bandwagon)*

It is widely held among S that  $p$

Therefore,  $p$  is true

*Basic form of appeal to common knowledge*

It is widely known among S that  $p$

Therefore,  $p$  is true<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> These forms were originally suggested by R. C. Pinto.

These forms capture the general evidentiary structure of the appeals as well as preserving the probative or fallacious qualities standardly associated with them. For example, the appeal to common knowledge still comes out as deductively valid on standard accounts of knowledge. As well, if the argument turns out to work as an appeal to authority (see below), this will be more apparent by identifying the group in which the widespread acceptance is asserted.

## NONSTANDARD TREATMENTS

### *Walton on Argument from Popularity*

One dissenting position to the standard view claims that appeals to popularity are not always fallacious. Walton takes this position when he argues that “not only is the appeal to popular sentiment or opinion of the type associated with the traditional *argumentum ad populum* a nonfallacious kind of argumentation in some contexts of dialogue, it is a legitimate technique and can be an important part of constructing a successful argument” (1992, 65).

To demonstrate his point, Walton (1992, 76–77) considers an example of the form *Everybody believes p, therefore p is true*. Walton claims that although inferences like this cannot be seen as offering conclusive proof of their conclusions, they can, if understood as defeasible, provide a “plausible, but provisional” basis for their conclusions. Walton goes on to explain how an inference of this form could be interpreted as enthymematic, where “additional premises concerning the backing of . . . [the conclusion] seem to be acting as background presumptions” (1992, 77). Instead of the “bare-bones” form given above, Walton proposes to analyze the argument with the following argumentation scheme:

- P1 Everybody (or everyone in some group) accepts A as a true proposition
- P2 These people are in a position to know that A is true, or at any rate,
- [P2\*] [These people] presumably have some reason for accepting A.
- [C.] Therefore, A may be accepted as true. (1992, 77)

Walton (1992, 79) claims that when interpreted in this way appeals to popularity can often be a reasonable form of argumentation.

While I agree that Walton’s analysis of the example could, in many circumstances, make the argument a reasonable one, I claim that such an interpretation does not redeem the appeal to popularity from being fallacious. Rather, it demonstrates that the appeal to popularity is fallacious and does not, on its own, provide an adequate reason for accepting a conclusion.

Walton’s reconstruction does not merely change the structure of the initial argument. Rather, it adds new and substantial evidence in support of the conclusion, and in doing so it effectively changes the type of argument being offered. To use the language of argumentation schemes, Walton’s reconstruction changes the argument from an appeal to popularity to a position-to-know argument.<sup>11</sup> In the first scheme, the fact of acceptance of a claim by a population is used as evidence for the acceptability of that claim. In the second scheme, the fact that a claim is believed does not, on its own, act to establish the acceptability of the claim.

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<sup>11</sup> Walton continues to use this type of strategy in his later book, *Appeal to Popular Opinion*, where he claims that “in many instances, the bare form of the bandwagon argument is tacitly supplemented by an appeal to another type of argument called ‘position to know’” (1999, 101).

Rather, it is posited that the claim is believed by others *because* it is acceptable and that they are in possession of grounds establishing that acceptability.

In a related move, Woods, Irvine, and Walton (2004, 37) claim that if appeals to popular opinion are interpreted as enthymematic arguments with an unstated premise asserting that *p*'s truth is the best explanation for everyone believing that *p*, then they can offer reasonable grounds for accepting *p*. But again here, the argument type has changed. We no longer have an appeal to popularity; instead, we have an inference to the best explanation. The justificatory work in such arguments is no longer being done by the fact that a claim is believed. Rather, as Woods, Irvine, and Walton themselves state, the success of such an argument will depend on whether *p*'s truth is in fact the best explanation of everyone's belief in it.

It would seem, then, that appeals to popularity can be reconstructed into arguments of different types that can offer provisional justification for their conclusions. Yet the justificatory work of such arguments is not accomplished by the premise asserting the prevalence of a belief. Instead, additional premises are required that speak directly to the epistemic status of the claim believed, by positing either its truth or the existence of good grounds for belief in it. Not only do these additional premises serve to explain, or legitimate the reasonableness of, the belief in the claim (i.e., the premise), they also carry the justificatory weight of the argument establishing the acceptability of the claim itself (i.e., the conclusion). Without the additional premises, the belief claims on their own do not seem to offer adequate support to their conclusions, as the well-foundedness of the initial belief (asserted in the premise) could remain in question.

In his book *Appeal to Popular Opinion* (1999, 101), Walton expands on his general thesis that arguments *ad populum* are not always fallacious but are often capable of providing plausible but provisional support for a conclusion, especially in situations where complete information is lacking. Ultimately, Walton (1999, ch. 7) proposes eleven subtypes of *ad populum* (not all of which have a bandwagon structure) and holds (1999, ch. 8) that their evaluation must be approached dialectically. Along the way, Walton argues that "many appeals to popular opinion have an epistemic component built in. In other words, many claims to popular opinion, when analyzed carefully, are not just claims that everybody believes such-and-such. They are implicitly or explicitly claims that everybody believes such-and-such because such-and-such proposition is common knowledge" (1999, 110).

Walton (1999, 227) links the *ad populum* appeal not only to common knowledge arguments but also to position-to-know arguments, expert opinion arguments, and deliberation (or considered opinion) arguments.<sup>12</sup> These alternate reconstructions all "bolster" (Walton 1999, 223) the basic appeal to popularity with additional evidence, usually in the form of a premise concerning the epistemic virtue of the claim popularly believed or the rational merit of the process by which popular belief in the claim was generated. Though this feature is not shared by all of Walton's reconstructions (many of the others introduce an emotional component to the argument, thereby excluding them from consideration here), the important point is that Walton (1999, 223–24) never provides a situation in which the basic form of the argument from popularity alone provides good reasons to accept its conclusion.<sup>13</sup> Rather, the goodness of *ad*

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<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, Walton explains the success of expert opinion arguments by recourse to position-to-know arguments: "Appeal to expert opinion is justified as a reasonable type of argument because the expert is in a position to know" (1999, 58).

<sup>13</sup> Walton (1999, 236ff.) does provide a pragmatic justification for arguments from popularity of the more straightforward kind, which do not involve the bolstering premises discussed here. This strategy is discussed below in the "Common Knowledge Is Uncontroversial" section.

*populum* arguments always derives somehow not only from the dialectical context in which the argument is deployed but also from additional information contained in its various bolstered reconstructions. To appreciate this, one need only imagine that the bolstering claims are either unknown or false. When this is done we are left with an argument based on a premise concerning the prevalence of a belief but no information about (or worse, information counting against) the plausibility of the belief or the reliability of the holders of the belief. For reasons already outlined, such an argument fails to provide good grounds for the acceptability of its conclusion. Thus, while we can agree with Walton's overall position, it does not seem to have contradicted the standard view that appeals to popularity, on their own, generally do not provide good reasons for the acceptability of their conclusions.

### THE ROLE OF COMMON KNOWLEDGE IN ARGUMENT

Though some texts seem to treat common knowledge and popular opinion more or less equivalently (Walton and Macagno 2005a; Woods, Irvine, and Walton 2004, 36), the standard picture we have been considering is that common knowledge and popular opinion work differently when used in arguments. Common knowledge can have a variety of argumentative functions. For example, Govier (2005, 136) and Johnson and Blair (1993, 63) describe how common knowledge can be used by an audience as a criterion for premise acceptability.

Pinto, Blair, and Parr (1993, 124), by contrast, describe the role of common knowledge as helping to determine when reasoners ought to be concerned about the acceptability of claims used in inferences. On this account, the fact that a claim is taken to be common knowledge does not serve as a reason justifying the acceptability of the claim; rather, it serves as a reason not to challenge the acceptability of the claim or not to worry about its acceptability being challenged by others.

There are two other important differences with this account. First, Pinto, Blair, and Parr do not stress the *shared* aspect of common knowledge but, rather, its *truth* and the fact that this truth is *obviously known* in a population. Further, their account is not audience centered. Rather, it shows how the idea of common knowledge can be used by arguers as well as audiences. Effectively, it says (1) if you are using a claim in an inference and you take it to be common knowledge, then you need not worry about its acceptability; and also (2) if a piece of reasoning is presented to you, and it involves premises that you think are common knowledge, you ought not to worry about the acceptability of those premises.

So far, then, we have two uses of common knowledge in argument. It can act as a guide for audiences when determining which claims to challenge and which claims to accept. It can also act as a guide for arguers when anticipating which of their assertions will pass unchallenged.

I do not raise issue with the legitimacy of either of these two argumentative uses of common knowledge, except to say that they have important similarities to the operation of popular opinion. If one feels that a claim is a matter of popular opinion in a given audience, it is reasonable to expect that it will not be challenged by that audience. So, that a claim is a matter of popular opinion can act as a guide for arguers when anticipating which of their assertions will pass unchallenged. Similarly, if one holds that a claim is a matter of popular opinion and one either is committed to it or is not committed to its opposite, then one ought not to worry about its acceptability when it is offered as a premise. On the other hand, that one has classified a claim as common knowledge ought not to alleviate subsequent concerns about its acceptability arising from the discovery of some specific reason to doubt the claim or its inconsistency with one's

other commitments. So, it is not the fact that a premise is classified either as common knowledge or as popular opinion that serves as a guide for challenging its acceptability; rather, it is the fit of that claim within one's present commitments that guides acceptability challenges. Thus, in terms of determining which claims will be accepted or challenged, there does not seem to be a significant difference in the operation of common knowledge and popular opinion in argument.

### *Common Knowledge as a Reason for Acceptance*

There is another argumentative role that common knowledge and popular opinion can have. This is the role where they are offered as reasons in support of a claim whose acceptability is disputed—argument moves that I have been calling *appeal to popular opinion* and *appeal to common knowledge*. This seems to be where the real differences in the argumentative functions of common knowledge and popular opinion are to be found.

The situation is one in which the acceptability of a claim is at issue.<sup>14</sup> That is, either it is not a shared commitment among participants to a dispute, or it is a shared commitment but the acceptability of that commitment has been called into question, or some other situation where the rational acceptability of a claim is to be determined by a process of argumentation. In this situation reasons must be produced in support of the acceptability of the claim at issue.

As I understand it, the standard account claims that in this situation an appeal to common knowledge can function as a successful reason-giving move where an appeal to popular opinion cannot: this is the picture I want to challenge. I argue that, in the situation where the acceptability of a claim is at issue, an appeal to common knowledge gives no better reason to accept that claim than an appeal to popular opinion.

My point here is neither empirical nor rhetorical. The question as to whether there is any rhetorical difference between appeals to common knowledge and appeals to popular opinion—whether there are circumstances in which one will be effective as means of persuasion or in bringing about agreement and the other will not—is an empirical question that will have to be answered relative to particular audiences at particular times. This is not my present concern. Rather, I am interested in the question of whether the claim that *Everyone knows that p* provides a good reason for accepting that *p*. More specifically, could such a move ever provide any better reason than the assertion *Because everyone believes that p*?

## DISTINGUISHING COMMON KNOWLEDGE AND POPULAR OPINION

If there is anything to the standard account, then it is crucial that we are able to somehow distinguish common knowledge from popular opinion.

### *Common Knowledge Is Widely Accepted*

One way has been proposed by Govier, who writes, “Appeals to the popularity of beliefs should not be confused with the notion of common knowledge. . . . The difference is that the belief whose popularity is appealed to is not universal in a culture, nor is it basic or elementary. Typically, its content is somewhat controversial, speculative, or normative. But it is claimed to

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<sup>14</sup> I assume that the claim at issue is not of the sort where its truth is a consequence of it being believed or accepted by a group.

be popular” (2005, 204 n. 12). On Govier’s account, the distinguishing feature of common knowledge is its universal acceptance, as well as it being basic or elementary. Freeman similarly identifies general acceptance as an identifying feature of common knowledge, writing, “That a claim is a matter of common knowledge creates a presumption for it, and what is a mark of common knowledge but general acceptance?” (2005, 36).

Problematically, that an opinion is held universally in a given population, as opposed to only popularly (or by a majority or select few) is no assurance of its truth or rational acceptability. Further, many claims that we might expect (or hope) to be universally, or at least commonly, known in a given population may well not be. Indeed, using the universality of assent as a marker for common knowledge seems especially unsuitable, not only because intuition and past experience tell us that such a condition is not likely to be met in normal cases of common knowledge but also because determining whether the condition was met would be exceedingly difficult. So, although general acceptance might help to distinguish common knowledge from specialized knowledge, it cannot help to distinguish it from popular opinion. Indeed, their general acceptance by a population seems to be the one property that common knowledge and popular opinion share.

This is not to say that the general acceptance of a claim is unimportant in its overall evaluation. A typical test of the acceptability of a claim is how well it fits with the rest of what we know, accept, or believe. Yet the coherence we hope to achieve in our rational life is not merely a consistency within the set of our personal beliefs. We also aim for a kind of consistency between our beliefs and those of the community at large. That is, we aim at a kind of concurrence with other rational agents, and we often take this concurrence to be a sign of the reliability of our own judgments and the soundness of our reasonings.

### *Common Knowledge Is Knowledge Held in Common*

Perhaps what separates common knowledge from popular opinion is that it is knowledge held *in common*—that it is a commitment shared among disputants or between arguer and audience.<sup>15</sup> On this account, the key feature of common knowledge is qualitative not quantitative; common knowledge need not be widespread, it need only be shared by the arguer and his or her intended audience. Surely, this is a necessary feature of some claim being classified as common knowledge. By classifying some claim as knowledge, I bestow on it an epistemic compliment that I do not extend to mere opinion. As such, I am implicitly endorsing it and thereby committing myself to it. By contrast, I could classify something as popular opinion without thereby endorsing it or committing myself to it. So, any parties counting the same claims as knowledge share a common commitment to those claims. Indeed, my classification of a claim as common knowledge implies not only that I accept the claim myself but that I hold it to be uncontroversial and, therefore, I expect that it will be generally accepted without challenge by my audience. (Classifying something as popular opinion would only imply the latter of these claims.)

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<sup>15</sup> Importantly, if it is the *commonness* of common knowledge that distinguishes it from popular opinion, then points of common knowledge will never be the subject of controversy among disputants. As such, this feature will not help to explain how an appeal that *p* is common knowledge could act as a reason for *p* when its acceptability is at issue. This is elaborated in the section “Common Knowledge Is Uncontroversial,” below. Here, I seek to raise a different set of concerns about citing the commonality of commitment as a sign of epistemic virtue.

Unfortunately, my classification of some claim as knowledge does not endow it with, or demonstrate that it has, the epistemic virtue with which I pay it compliment. As such, that we both do this does no more than show that we are both committed to some claim. As mentioned at the outset, this gives us license to use the claim as a starting place for argumentation, but it cannot establish its acceptability. Indeed, we might share commitment to some false or rationally unacceptable claims. (And even if we do not, consider what might pass for common knowledge among racists or flat-earthers.) On such an account, to classify a claim as common knowledge does little more than to say that it is a matter of popular opinion *among us* rather than *among them*. Thus, while the commonness of common knowledge might explain why it typically goes unchallenged in argumentation, it cannot explain the argumentative goodness of appeals to common knowledge.

### *Common Knowledge Is Basic or Fundamental*

A second feature suggested by Govier's account (above) is that common knowledge is somehow basic or elementary in a culture. But what can be meant by this if it does not simply mean that claims classified as common knowledge are broadly accepted? If it means that the knowledge is somehow fundamental or foundational, then probably it is false. The foundational principles of physics, mathematics, logic, and reasoning are not widely known but, instead, form an abstract body of highly specialized knowledge.

Perhaps, then, it might mean that the beliefs are somehow basic to the culture itself. Walton seems to propose an account of this sort when he offers a script-based, or *eikotic*, account of common knowledge whereby “[common knowledge] claims can be taken for granted as holding on the basis of common experience, of common understanding of the way things normally work in familiar situations” (2001, 104, and see *passim*). (Although this view has elements of the “Common Knowledge Is Knowledge Held in Common” account discussed above, I here focus on it being grounded in a familiar cultural practice aspect.) For example, in Christian cultures the following claims might be classified as common knowledge: (a) Christianity is a religion, (b) according to the Christian religion, God created the universe, and (c) God did create the universe. The centrality of the practice of Christianity in Christian cultures would explain why these claims have such a broad base of acceptance. The problem with such an account is that the centrality of a practice to a culture does not guarantee its foundedness in reality or the way things are: consider cultures whose practices and belief systems are deeply superstitious or magical. As such, some of the tenets of a cultural practice might well be false or rationally unacceptable, despite being widely accepted. While (a) and (b) might count as true and uncontroversial in non-Christian cultures, (c) might well be a contentious claim whose truth is by no means obvious. Nor is the truth or rational acceptability of (c) established by the centrality of Christianity to some culture. As with the widespread belief in a claim, the epistemic virtues of that claim ought to (help) explain its centrality in a culture, rather than the other way around.

### *Common Knowledge Is Uncontroversial*

Another strategy for isolating the distinguishing feature of common knowledge focuses on the idea that it is not controversial. This absence of controversy surrounding common knowledge explains its general acceptance. Walton, for example, writes: “Assumptions based on common knowledge in a case are propositions that are not in issue in the case. They are taken for

granted by the speaker, and they would not likely be questioned or disputed by the hearer” (2001, 96). In a similar move, Pinto, Blair, and Parr claim that a common knowledge claim is one “that most people of our culture obviously know to be true” and whose “acceptability . . . is quite unproblematic” (1993, 124).

The problem with such accounts is that they assume that the acceptability of the claim, *p*, classified as common knowledge is not at issue. Rather, the common knowledge claim is *already* acceptable and thus does not stand in need of any reason for its acceptability. But the move of appeal to common knowledge presumes that the acceptability of *p* is at issue and further promises that the premise that *p is common knowledge* gives some good reason for *p*’s acceptability. Problematically, accounts whereby common knowledge is distinguished by an absence of controversy do not seem to fit this situation at all. Thus, if this is the right account of common knowledge, then appeals to common knowledge ought to fail as reason-giving moves in argument.

Indeed, Walton’s account of why such uncontroversial claims should be accepted in an argumentative discussion does not rely on reasons in any evidential sense. Rather, Walton and Macagno (2005b, 29) argue that such claims should be admitted on pragmatic grounds, in an effort to move an argumentative dialogue forward and not bog it down in needless controversy. Importantly, it is precisely this line of argument by which Walton (1999, 236–41) seeks to justify unbolstered instances of appeals to popularity. Walton (1999, 239) proposes a pragmatic, Gricean-like conversational maxim called the *maxim of nondisputativeness* that generally directs that noncontroversial assertions be granted for the sake of argument even when no proof can be supplied.

Yet this account does not explain how common knowledge appeals do any reason-giving work in argument. First, the account assumes that the “common knowledge” claim is uncontroversial or not at issue. Second, the *maxim of nondisputativeness* prescribes that noncontroversial claims be provisionally accepted in argument even when no reason is offered in their support, so presenting premises by appealing to common knowledge is superfluous.

### *Common Knowledge Is Just Popular Opinion*

In keeping with Walton’s dissenting view concerning the general fallaciousness of appeals to popularity, Walton and Macagno (2005a, 2005b) develop the view discussed above to a point where there is little difference between common knowledge and popular opinion. They write: “In many cases, the agents accept a premise on the basis of common knowledge, even though they are not realistically in a position to verify it, or to prove it by examining the scientific evidence relevant to evaluating it as objectively true. They just accept it, because it is not really in dispute at the present stage of a discussion or investigation, because it is generally accepted, and because there is no reason not to accept it” (2005b, 4). Indeed, Walton and Macagno abandon an epistemic account of common knowledge in favor of a doxastic account whereby “something is common knowledge if everybody believes that it is true, [and] everybody believes that everybody [believes] that it is true, and so forth” (2005a, 4). Given Walton’s view that, in many situations, appeal to popular opinion is a legitimate but defeasible form of presumptive argument, similar explanations can be offered for the successes of appeals to common knowledge.

While I disagree with this analysis of the nature of common knowledge, it is one that is consistent with my central thesis that appeals to common knowledge and appeals to popular

opinion ought to be equally successful as reason-giving moves in argument. Yet I have argued above that the unbolstered form of appeal to popularity generally fails as a reason-giving move in argument.

*Common Knowledge Is a Source of Presumption*

Freeman (1995, 265) accepts the standard picture of the probative difference between appeals to common knowledge and appeals to popular opinion on the grounds that a claim being common knowledge creates a presumption in its favor, whereas a claim being a matter of popular opinion does not. By the same token, Freeman (1995, 272) claims that this presumption is only created when an arguer him- or herself recognizes a claim as common knowledge and that claims that are at issue do not receive rational or evidentiary support from premises asserting their common knowledge status.<sup>16</sup>

On this analysis, Freeman's position is consistent with the one argued here. Although the fact that an arguer judges, or classifies, a claim to be a matter of common knowledge can give him or her license to accept that claim, in a situation where the acceptability of a claim is at issue, an appeal to common knowledge does not provide any reason that could settle the matter as to the acceptability of the claim. Indeed, on Freeman's analysis, the only place where common knowledge seems to have a role is in cases where the acceptability of a claim is not really at issue. Classifying a claim as common knowledge is an indication that the arguer *already* accepts the claim, for if one did not accept it, one would not classify it as common knowledge (one might instead classify it as a matter of popular opinion). Thus the classification of a claim as common knowledge is not really a *reason* to accept it, so much as an indication that one already accepts it for other reasons.

Indeed, on Freeman's account, what initially provides matters of common knowledge with their presumptive acceptability is the fact that they are "properly vouched for by sources for which there is a standing presumption of trustworthiness" (1995, 272). Freeman develops this account as follows: "This survey indicates that common knowledge is not some additional interpersonal source besides personal testimony, testimony through some chain, expert opinion, or the word of trusted authorities. Common knowledge has come to us through these various sources—different sources for different people. Standardly, we have forgotten the particular source, so that we cannot discuss the presumptive reliability of the particular source in this particular instance. However, the belief has been transmitted not just to us, but to persons in our culture generally" (2005, 31). Thus, for Freeman, the argumentative function of common knowledge is not that it confers a presumptive status on a claim or that it provides a reason for a claim's acceptability but, rather, that it is a mark of a claim's presumptive status, which it gained from a reliable source. Importantly, this mark of acceptability can survive even in cases where reasoners fail to track the initial and actual justificatory sources for their views and can thereby

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<sup>16</sup> . Freeman (1995, 271) speculates that there could be three reasons why a challenger might not recognize (or acknowledge) a claim as a matter of common knowledge:

1. *One has temporarily forgotten that it is a matter of common knowledge.*
2. *The cultural transmission mechanisms failed in this case to transmit this item of common knowledge to the individual.*
3. *It simply is not a matter of common knowledge.*

In each case, Freeman argues that merely insisting that the claim is a matter of common knowledge would not be an effective strategy of persuasion in getting the challenger to accept the claim.

act as a guide for reasoners when deciding whether to accept, challenge, or reject a claim. This picture of how common knowledge functions in argument and reasoning is similar to that offered by Pinto, Blair, and Parr (1993, 124) and is one with which I am largely in agreement.

Strangely though, on Freeman's final analysis, the mark of common knowledge becomes the general acceptance of the claim (presumably combined with the fact that we ourselves accept it): "We have, in general, then acquired common knowledge or commonsense beliefs through taking someone else's word. That the other members of our culture share these beliefs suggests that we can speak of common knowledge as a source. Questions of the presumptive reliability of common knowledge then rest on the commonality of the belief rather than the features of a particular source or chain of sources" (2005, 310–11). For reasons outlined in the sections "Common Knowledge Is Widely Accepted" and "Common Knowledge Is Knowledge Held in Common" (above), the characteristic of commonality of belief is not sufficient to demarcate common knowledge from popular opinion.

### *Common Knowledge Is Knowledge*

I contend that the features distinguishing common knowledge from popular opinion are not to be found in any of these aspects. If there is any distinction to be made between common knowledge and popular opinion, then it cannot rely on the fact of acceptance: the *commonness* of the knowledge, the *popularity* of the belief, the *uncontroversial* nature of the claim, or the *familiarity* of the practice associated with the claim.

Yet there is an obvious difference between them. Considered as a classificatory system, the categories of common knowledge and popular opinion could include quite different claims. The category of popular opinion would include claims that we think an audience is likely to accept. The category of common knowledge would include claims not only that we think an audience will be likely to accept but which we think an audience ought to accept, and without much convincing or additional proof, and which we, ourselves, would be willing to endorse—all because we hold them to be epistemically good. Thus, it would seem that common knowledge claims ought to be a subset of popular opinion claims.

Considered as sentence types, claims to common knowledge assert something quite different than claims to popular opinion. Compare the statements *Everybody believes that p* and *Everybody knows that p*. The first is an assertion about the frequency of acceptance or belief in a claim. The second is an assertion about the epistemic status of a claim. Yet, while a claim to common knowledge is not explicitly a statement about the frequency of a belief, it is implicitly so on standard accounts of knowledge whereby knowledge is true belief plus something else. On this analysis, the distinguishing features of common knowledge are readily apparent. Claims of common knowledge assert everything asserted by claims of popular opinion, plus something about the epistemic status of the claim. As such, it is the epistemic status of the commonly known belief, and not its prevalence in a population, that sets common knowledge apart from mere popular opinion.

In general, there are three components to common knowledge assertions: a belief (or commitment) component, a truth component, and an epistemic component. I have argued that the distinguishing feature of common knowledge is not to be found in the belief component, which is shared with popular opinion. Nor is it to be found in the truth component, for reasons given below. Instead, I argue that the distinguishing feature of common knowledge must be found in its epistemic component, and if there is any argumentative difference in appeals to common

knowledge and appeals to popular opinion, it is this epistemic component that must be doing the argumentative work.

### *Explaining the Knowledge in Common Knowledge*

If this is correct, any explanation of appeal to common knowledge as a successful reason-giving move in argument requires a working notion of knowledge. It is widely agreed that propositional knowledge is to be explained as some form of “good true belief” (Zagzebski 1999, 99). I do not here advocate any particular account of how that goodness should be explained.<sup>17</sup> In this respect, my point does not rely on whether one takes a justificationist, evidentialist, causal, reliabilist, or any other preferred approach to explaining the nature of knowledge. Nor do I assume that any one theory will be able to account for all cases of propositional knowledge. Rather, I assume only a general picture of propositional knowledge whereby individual knowledge claims involve three components: a belief condition, a truth condition, and some kind of epistemic condition (however that is to be explained). My point is that, in cases of appeal to common knowledge, it is this something else—whatever that something else turns out to be—that is doing the argumentative, reason-giving work.

### APPEALS TO COMMON KNOWLEDGE

Accepting that some version of the “good true belief” theory of knowledge is the one to go with, I return to the question of the correctness of the standard account. Are appeals to common knowledge generally capable of providing good grounds for the acceptability of a claim, whereas appeals to popularity are not? Should appeals to common knowledge be any more successful as reason-giving moves than appeals to popular opinion?

### *Evaluating Common Knowledge as a Reason for Acceptance*

It is my position that, in cases where the acceptability of a claim,  $p$ , is at issue, assertions that  $p$  is commonly known give no better reason for accepting  $p$  than assertions that  $p$  is widely believed. Yet these two forms of argument fail for different reasons. Whereas the appeal to popular opinion standardly fails to give good reasons because its premise is not properly connected to its conclusion, generally the inferential connection in the common knowledge appeal is good, being both relevant and sufficient. The real problem with the appeal to common knowledge resides with the acceptability of its premise in cases where its conclusion is at issue.

If knowledge claims are unpacked as claims asserting that some proposition is justified (or meets some other epistemic condition), and true, and believed, then any assertion that  $p$  is known ought to be unacceptable for just the same reasons that  $p$  itself was unacceptable: namely,  $p$ 's truth and justification are at issue. Yet accepting that  $p$  is true and accepting that belief in  $p$  is justified are both involved in—they are constituent parts of—accepting that  $p$  is known. So, in cases where the acceptability of  $p$  is under dispute, respondents have a reason not to accept the premise of common knowledge appeals: namely, that a claim presupposed by the premise is at

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<sup>17</sup> Nor do I here give reasons for the “true belief plus” conception of propositional knowledge. Yet the point remains, for those wishing to give this up, some viable alternative must be supplied before the distinction between appeals to common knowledge and appeals *ad populum* can be explained.

issue. The appeal itself, therefore, begs the question. Thus, without recourse to additional reasons, not articulated in the appeal itself, the acceptability of the premise in appeals to common knowledge ought to be disputed in all cases where the conclusion is under dispute. Further, it would seem that settling the matter of  $p$ 's acceptability is a prerequisite for determining the acceptability of knowledge claims about  $p$ . Thus, whatever additional reasons are offered in support of the premise of the appeal ought to offer direct and independent support to its conclusion. As such, the common knowledge premise ceases to function as a reason in the argument.

*Appeals to Common Knowledge: The Truth Condition*

On standard accounts of knowledge the principle of veridicality,  $K(S,p) \rightarrow p$ , is axiomatic, and  $p$  is a direct consequence of  $S$  knows that  $p$  (for any  $S$ , including premises of the form *It is widely known among  $S$  that  $p$* ). So appeals to common knowledge, being deductively valid, appear as though they should be perfectly acceptable arguments. But consider cases where the acceptability of  $p$  is under dispute. If an arguer believes or is committed to  $\sim p$ , then *modus tollens* should lead him or her to deduce the falsity of the premise being asserted. If the arguer is not committed to  $\sim p$  but is inquiring into the rational acceptability of  $p$ , he or she ought to realize that accepting  $p$  is involved in accepting that  $S$  knows that  $p$ . In either case, the very fact that the acceptability of  $p$  is at issue gives the arguer a reason to find the premise unacceptable.

*Dropping the Truth Condition on Knowledge*

Recently, some authors have advocated dropping the truth condition on knowledge. Walton (2005), for example, proposes a pragmatic conception of knowledge, as opposed to the idealized conception of knowledge he identifies with traditional epistemology and analytic philosophy. The pragmatic approach is built from two commonsense platitudes that capture our everyday epistemic situation in the world: (1) a knowledge base can be incomplete, and (2) knowledge is defeasible. Epistemic agents often operate in conditions of uncertainty, incomplete knowledge, and even contradictory information. Epistemic agents are also fallible; the knowledge they work with is thereby defeasible and subject to retraction. Walton proposes a model of rationality and an attendant account of knowledge to fit this situation.

Effectively Walton encourages us to an account of knowledge that drops the truth component.<sup>18</sup> Dropping the veridicality axiom eliminates the preliminary reason (given above) for finding appeals to common knowledge probatively problematic. Interestingly, it does this by weakening the inferential connection between the premise and the conclusion in appeal to (common) knowledge arguments. Arguments of the form  *$S$  knows that  $p$ , therefore  $p$*  become defeasible, but do they thereby become capable of providing uncontested reasons for accepting  $p$ ?

I maintain that the truth component of knowledge assertions is not the crux of the problem in appeals to common knowledge. The truth component of the knowledge assertion

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<sup>18</sup> While I think that such a picture of knowledge is worth taking note of, I do not here advocate this kind of view. Indeed, my own opinion is that such an account is best taken as an account of rationally held belief and that retaining the truth component of knowledge serves the important conceptual and theoretical role of distinguishing knowledge from rational belief.

cannot be doing the reason-giving work in inferences that appeal to (common) knowledge, because such reasoning would be circular. Thus, it is neither the belief component nor the truth component in a knowledge claim (standardly explained) that can do the reason-giving work in establishing the acceptability of the content of that knowledge claim. Rather, if anything can offer reasons, it is the epistemic component of the knowledge claim.

*Appeals to Common Knowledge: The Epistemic Condition*

Yet a problem similar to the one just described concerning the truth condition also applies to the epistemic condition asserted by the premise in common knowledge appeals. Consider again the situation where the acceptability of  $p$  is at issue. The premise of the common knowledge appeal presupposes the epistemic condition that [J\*], the knower is justified in his or her belief that  $p$ . If [J\*] is to serve as a reason for the arguer's acceptance of  $p$ , it must be assumed that the knower's justification is unproblematic. That is, it must be assumed not merely that the knower is subjectively justified in believing that  $p$  given his or her other beliefs but that this justification is objectively good and not subject to defeat because of factors unbeknownst to him or her. That a "knower" is subjectively justified in mistakenly believing that  $p$ , or that his or her doxastic state makes it rational to accept bad reasons for believing that  $p$ , does not provide a good reason for *us* to come to accept that  $p$ . Rather, for [J\*] to count as a good reason for us to accept that  $p$ , it must be assumed that the justification relied on by the putative knower is objectively good and unproblematic. Yet the question as to whether there is some unproblematic justification for believing that  $p$  is what is at issue in determining whether  $p$  is acceptable. So, the fact that  $p$  is at issue gives an arguer a reason not to accept the assertion that the epistemic condition of the common knowledge claim has been satisfied in an unproblematic way, at least not without some additional evidence to this effect.

The real problem with common knowledge appeals is that they provide no evidence that this epistemic component has been met. Because the assertion that  $p$  is known does not, on its own, provide any substantive evidence of either  $p$ 's truth or  $p$ 's justification, the claim that  $p$  is known does not, on its own, provide any evidence that might contribute to settling the matter of  $p$ 's acceptability. Rather, it merely asserts the very things that are at issue.

In cases where the acceptability of  $p$  is under dispute, the premise of a common knowledge appeal ought to be acceptable only if some type of premise support is given. What is required to establish the acceptability of the premise is some additional claim(s) demonstrating that either the epistemic condition or the truth condition of the knowledge claim has, in fact, been met. Yet this same information would independently provide substantive reasons sufficient to establish  $p$ 's acceptability. Thus in any case where the premise of a common knowledge appeal ought to be acceptable, the conclusion ought to be acceptable for the same reasons that the premise is. Because of this, the premise of a common knowledge appeal is not epistemically prior to its conclusion and cannot act as a reason for its acceptance. Instead, the common knowledge assertion is argumentatively inert in such cases.

If there are independent reasons for holding that  $p$  is known, it is my contention that the acceptability of  $p$  will rest entirely on the acceptability, relevance, and sufficiency of those reasons and not on the reason provided in the initial appeal to common knowledge. In this way, appeals to common knowledge can resemble appeals to popularity where the reconstruction of such a move involves supplementing the basic appeal with bolstering claims of the position to know, appeal to authority, or inference to the best explanation and so on variety.

In situations where the acceptability of an initial claim, *p*, is challenged, the only *uncontested* claim asserted in an appeal to common knowledge is that *p* is commonly believed. That is, appeals to common knowledge are no different than appeals to popular opinion. Yet there is broad agreement that appeals to popular opinion are fallacious and do not provide adequate reasons to establish the acceptability of a claim. As such, appeals to common knowledge ought to fair no better.<sup>19</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Clearly, arguers starting from points that are not acceptable to their audiences will not get very far in their projects of persuasion. As such, just as our presently held beliefs are the only available starting places for our individual reasonings (even speculative hypotheses will be generated and selected on this basis), so are commonly held beliefs the only viable starting places for arguments that aim at persuasion. On the other hand, that we must start from someplace does not necessarily make it a good place—other places might well be preferable. The hope is that the projects of inquiry, argumentation, critical examination, and rational assessment will bring us to that better place. But getting there involves realizing that the fact that a claim is accepted is not an indication of its truth, and it is not even an indication of its acceptability.

Common knowledge is an important category in argumentation because it marks out a class of claims that are generally true and uncontentious. Common knowledge claims are generally effective starting places for persuasive argumentation, provide a vast store of generally acceptable premises, and are generally good candidates for supplying unexpressed premises in argument reconstruction. Common knowledge can also have a role in formulating policies of challenge and acceptance by acting as a guide for anticipating challenge and as a marker of prior acceptance. Yet in all of these respects common knowledge is no different from popular opinion. Nor, as I have argued, are appeals to common knowledge any different than appeals to popular opinion in their ability to provide reasons in support of a conclusion whose acceptability is at issue.

The standard view that appeals to common knowledge generally provide good grounds for the acceptability of a claim whereas appeals to popular opinion do not is wrong. In cases where a claim is under dispute, appeals that it is common knowledge generally provide no better evidence for a claim than appeals to popular opinion, and as such they ought to be evaluated similarly. Although they assert more than appeals to popular opinion, and it is on the basis of this that they *appear* to give better reasons in support of their conclusions, appeals to common knowledge actually fail to provide any evidentiary support for this additional assertoric content. Appeal to popular opinion makes an assertion about the frequency of a belief in a population, and appeal to common knowledge makes an assertion about the epistemic status of a claim. On standard accounts of knowledge, this assertion can be broken down into three components: a belief component, a truth component, and an epistemic component. Yet the acceptability of the alethic and epistemic components of common knowledge claims ought to be at issue in any case where the acceptability of the content of that knowledge claim is genuinely at issue. Thus, the

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<sup>19</sup> If I am correct, the theorist is faced with a choice: give up the true belief plus account of knowledge or concede that there is little probative difference between appeals to common knowledge and appeals to popular opinion. Importantly, the theorist wishing to take the former route must still provide some theoretically sound account of the nature of knowledge, in order to maintain that there is some probative difference between these two kinds of appeal.

premise in a common knowledge appeal ought to be unacceptable in any case where its conclusion is at issue. As such, appeals to common knowledge, on their own, are not capable of giving any better reason to accept a conclusion than appeals to popular opinion.

What, then, might the argumentative role of appeal to common knowledge be? In principle, I agree with Freeman's analysis of our acquisition of common knowledge: "We acquire common knowledge through some presumptively acceptable source, even if we can no longer identify the source" (2005, 311). This account allows common knowledge to play an important role in reasoning and argument.

In the context of individual reasoning, common knowledge seems to function as a kind of proxy for initially presumptive reasons that have not been tracked. In this situation, a reasoner can check on a claim's acceptability by asking him- or herself whether it is a matter of common knowledge. In reality, though, common knowledge is a mark of prior acceptance, not of acceptability. This "acceptability check" might amount to little more than verifying that the claim is already among one's commitments, or that it generally coheres with the rest of what one knows, or at the very least that it is not inconsistent with one's present beliefs and that one holds it to be widely believed among one's knowledgeable peers. Nevertheless, common knowledge retains an important role in reasoning, for in order for something to be common knowledge, most people do not need to be in possession of, or have an understanding of, the underlying justification or evidence that would independently establish the claim.

In the context of dialectical argumentation, appeals to common knowledge seem to be a way of bolstering a "take-my-word-for-it" type of appeal.<sup>20</sup> The proponent of such an appeal is promising the audience that taking his or her word for it in this case is a low-risk move because the matter really is not contentious among those who know about or are familiar with it. But if such a move were to succeed, it should only do so on the authority of the arguer. As a reason-giving move in argument, the assertion of the premise in an appeal to common knowledge does not provide any uncontroversial evidence for the acceptability of a controversial conclusion. Although the appeal implicitly asserts that there are good grounds for accepting the conclusion, it does not make explicit what those grounds are. Instead, the common knowledge appeal seems to act as a kind of proxy for other, actual, preexisting grounds that are not widely known or are no longer available to the arguer. Yet, if the conclusion is genuinely at issue, then it is precisely those grounds that are required in order to settle the matter of acceptability.

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<sup>20</sup> This analysis was suggested by R. C. Pinto.

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