



Everybody else is thinking it, so why can't we?

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Abstract

Does the fact that other people believe something give me a reason to believe it, too? Yes, and this epistemic fact is explained by the principle of common consent (PCC). PCC says that if S knows that others believe that P, then this fact gives S a reason to believe that P. Despite the fact that most logic texts file the appeal to the majority under the category of a fallacy, the principle of common consent is true. The principle can be defended by an appeal to the interpretive dilemma, a lesson from the epistemology of disagreement, an analogy to epistemic self-trust, and an inference to the best explanation for a wide range of epistemic data. Typical objections to the principle are unpersuasive and rest on either an infallibilist epistemology or an interpretive mistake.

Key words Common consent · Appeal to majority · Justified belief · Ad populum · Consensus · Gentium

1 Common consent

Suppose you were asked to place a bet on whether a particular claim were true or false. Suppose further that the only bit of information you have about this claim is that at least some other people think it's true. How should you bet? Is it more reasonable for you to bet that the claim in question is true, to bet that the claim in question is false, or to place an arbitrary bet?

The reasonable thing to do is to bet that the claim is true. Your evidential situation provides a sort of presumption in favor of thinking that the claim is true. That presumption is provided by the fact that you know that at least some other people believe something, and you thereby have a reason to believe it, too. Since philoso-

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phers sometimes refer to popular consensus as ‘common consent’, I shall call the epistemic principle that explains this fact the principle of common consent.

The principle of common consent is widely considered to be false (e.g. Fricker 2014). I argue that it is true. The fact that other people believe something is a reason for you to believe it, too. Section 1 elucidates the principle and explains the principle’s connection both to important arguments in philosophy and to the fallacy of appealing to the majority. Section 2 argues that the principle of common consent is true. Section 3 addresses important objections to the principle.

1.1 The principle of common consent

Like any philosophical principle, there are a variety of different ways of expressing the principle of common consent. Here is the one I prefer:

PCC: If S knows that others believe that P, then this fact gives S a reason to believe that P.

The important features of this principle are clarified in the following six points.

First, it’s a species of an access-internalist condition. The fact that most people believe something doesn’t become a reason for you to believe it until you’re aware of the fact that most people believe something. That’s why my preferred statement of the principle flags that *knowing* that others believe something is sufficient for providing you with a reason to believe it, too.¹

Second, by ‘others’ I mean presently existing human people. The restriction to the present is meant to reflect the fact that, as a general rule, our evidence base should be as expansive as possible, and this requires taking in the latest discoveries and experiential data. Perhaps the fact that people in the past believed something is also a reason for us to believe it, too. Perhaps the fact that people in the future will come to believe something is also a reason for us to believe it, too. PCC is neutral on both suppositions. Perhaps further it’s also the case that if *non-human* people believe something then it is also a reason for us to do so as well. Again, PCC is neutral on that point. The principle states only that our knowledge of the fact that other presently existing human people believe something is sufficient (not necessary) for us to have a reason to do so as well.

Third, the principle is about what other people *believe*, not about the *testimony* of other people. For example, in a case where you know that other people believe something even though none of these individuals has testified, reported their belief to you, or counseled you in any way, PCC implies that you have a reason to agree with them even in the absence of testimony from these individuals. In that sense, the debate over PCC is not reducible to any debates in the epistemology of testimony.

Fourth, the principle states the epistemic goods in terms of a reason to believe. It’s not obvious that ‘reasonable’, ‘justifiable’, etc. all track the same epistemic concept. I rely on the notion of a reason to believe something and leave open whether this is

¹ Perhaps a weaker version of PCC is also true. The antecedent of PCC could be weakened from ‘knows’ to some weaker epistemic state. For example, perhaps something short of knowledge, say justified belief or even mere belief, that most others believe something would be enough to generate a reason for me to believe it as well.

the same as justification or other philosophical terms of art. In this sense, ‘reason’ tracks some sort of epistemic reason (rather than practical reason), where an epistemic reason is something that counts in favor of the truth of some proposition.

Fifth, the strength of the reason provided by the beliefs of others is variable. In particular, the strength of the reason will vary with both the quantity and quality of the others in question. Regarding quantity, the fact that only one other person believes that P provides only a slight reason to believe P yourself. On the other hand, the fact that most other people believe P provides a powerful reason for you to concur. It’s important, however, not to overstate this point: even the slenderest reason is often enough to ground rational action. For example, if you weren’t sure on which side of a restaurant the restroom is located, finding out that a single patron believed it’s on the left (in the absence of all other information) is a good enough reason to head left. So even though the strength of the epistemic reason is variable, even very slight reasons will often be enough for practical action (again, in the absence of all other information).

Regarding quality, your awareness of the nature of the other believers also affects the strength of the reasons their beliefs provide. There are too many different layers of quality to offer a complete picture here, but two elements that are particularly important are the independence of others’ beliefs and the epistemic virtues of those believers. For independence, if 100 people come to believe P independently of one another, then this consensus provides you with a better reason to believe P than in the case where 100 people believe P but only because they all took the word of a single source. For epistemic virtue, if 10 conscientious people come to believe P, then this consensus provides you with better reasons than if 10 epistemically sloppy people come to believe P.

Of course, none of this provides guidance on cases in which quantity and quality are at odds with one another. Instead, all of these qualifications are simply *ceteris paribus*. For an example of conflict, suppose 100 non-experts believe that P and a single expert believes that not-P. PCC is compatible with saying that in a case like this you have a defeasible reason to believe that P (because of the fact described in the first conjunct), and that this reason has, in fact, been defeated (because of the fact described in the second conjunct). It is beyond the scope of this paper to describe all of the various ways in which quantity and quality can come into conflict and how the various reasons get netted out in those sorts of cases.²

Sixth, and finally, the consequent of PCC says only that common consent provides us with *a* reason to believe something.³ That is manifestly not the same as saying that common consent makes something reasonable to believe *all things considered*. There are three impediments blocking the move from having a reason to believe P to it being reasonable to believe P.

² Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for *Synthese* for raising the point about how quantity and quality (and even different sorts of quality judgments) can conflict.

³ Kevin McCain notes that PCC could be weakened in a way that retains at least some of its explanatory potency. In particular, PCC might be weakened to say only that common consent provides a sort of presumption in favor of a belief that makes belief more reasonable than disbelief and yet falls short of saying that you actually have a reason to believe it. This is a kind of epistemic presumption described by Chisholm in *Theory of Knowledge*.

1. There are many different philosophical accounts of reasonable belief. Some understand reasonable belief in a very weak way. For example, it is reasonable to believe that P if and only if it is reasonable to think that P is more likely than not-P. Other conceptions of reasonable belief have much higher standards for what counts as reasonable belief. For example, perhaps it's not reasonable to believe that your lottery ticket will lose, even though it's more reasonable to think that it is more likely to lose than win. In any case, since there are different conceptions of what it takes for a belief to be reasonable all things considered, PCC does not entail anything about whether common consent renders a belief reasonable all things considered.⁴
2. Even holding constant a weak notion of reasonable belief, the singular reason provided by common consent might be defeated. That is why some philosophers frame the principle this way: the beliefs and testimony of all others are *prima facie* credible (Rollins 2015, p. 80). For example, if a witness testifies that she saw the defendant at the crime scene, you have a reason to believe that the defendant was at the crime scene. But if you later learn that the witness is unreliable, her testimony is defeated. You should be agnostic about the defendant's whereabouts.
3. Third, even when a reason for P is not defeated, it may be swamped by all of the *other* reasons available to you, rendering belief in P unreasonable. If you have a reason to believe P—and no other reasons pushing in either direction—then that singular reason might be enough to make the belief that P reasonable all things considered (but it might not—see point one about the threshold for categorical belief). Common consent carries the day. In other cases, things won't be equal, and you will have access to “insider information” that will trump the presumption of common consent. For example, if you survive a plane crash and find out that most people in the world think you are dead, the evidence from common consent is soundly swamped by your evidence to the contrary.

Combined, these three points show that there is no quick and easy route from having a reason to believe that P to it being reasonable all things considered to believe that P.

Despite this, PCC does say that the beliefs of others provide a reason to believe that P, and sometimes that reason is a powerful one and sometimes that reason will be strong enough to make P reasonable all things considered. This is a strong principle, and as we'll see, it's one that has been deployed throughout the history of philosophy to argue for claims in religion, politics, ethics, and more.

1.2 Arguments from common consent

Arguments that deploy some version of the principle of common consent to reach a conclusion about what someone is justified in believing or what is reasonable to believe are often called arguments from common consent (Rollins 2015). These arguments typically take the following form:

1. If there is widespread belief that P, then we ought to believe that P.

⁴ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for *Synthese* for pointing out that conceptions of reasonable belief can be strong or weak and that the implications of PCC will vary according to which conception of reasonable belief we adopt.

2. There is widespread belief that _____.
3. Therefore, we ought to believe that _____.

Premise one is a modified version of PCC (and one that makes the mistake of moving from having *a* reason to it being reasonable *all things considered*). Filling in the blank would transform this argument schema into an instance. Arguments from common consent can be made anytime we know others believe something.

We can fill in the blank with all sorts of things. For example, when it comes to philosophical matters, there is pretty good evidence that most contemporary people believe that we have free will, capital punishment is sometimes just, and there is no objective moral code. Determining whether the minor premise is true for any instance of the argument form will rely on our best evidence about what most people think. In that respect, it's an empirical question.

Historically, the most important arguments from common consent in philosophy have to do with the existence of God (Edwards 1967). Early examples can be found in thinkers like Plato (*Laws*, Book X, 886) and Cicero (*The Nature of the Gods*, Book I, 44). In the Medieval era, the argument was prevalent enough to garner its own name: the *consensus gentium*. The argument continued to hold force into the modern and contemporary eras as testified by no less a philosopher than John Stuart Mill:

As the human intellect, though weak, is not essentially perverted, there is a certain presumption of the truth of any opinion held by many human minds....And this consideration has a special relevance to the inquiry concerning the foundations of theism, inasmuch as no argument for the truth of theism is more commonly invoked or more confidently relied on, than the general assent of mankind. (*Theism*)

The basic idea is that the fact that most people believe in God is a reason for you to believe in God. While this sort of argument need not rely on PCC (e.g. it might rely on an inference to the best explanation instead, see Kelly (2011) for an example), the truth of PCC would be one straightforward way of explaining the soundness of this instance of the argument from common consent.

Of course, defending the truth of PCC doesn't require defending any particular instance of the argument from common consent. In the case for God, in particular, the conclusion is subject to all of the qualifications limned in §1.1. Against the conditional premise, one might argue that certain naturalistic accounts of religious belief show how belief in God might be widespread yet false. If so, one can argue that whatever evidence widespread theistic belief would otherwise provide has been defeated (e.g. Bulbulia 2013). Against the minor premise, one might argue that theistic belief really isn't all that widespread given the different names and conceptions of God one finds across the globe (e.g. Johnston 2009). In either case, granting the truth of PCC won't settle the question of the soundness of common consent arguments for God. Instead, the real action shifts to the details concerning how humans form beliefs about God and not against the general epistemic principle that the beliefs of others provide us with reasons to believe.

1.3 The Fallacy of appeal to the majority

The knee-jerk reaction of many philosophers will be to reject PCC outright (e.g. Dobrzeniecki 2018, p. 147). “After all,” they might think, “every logic book on the planet classifies this kind of inference as a fallacy.” Students who take a course in logic or critical thinking are told to beware of inferences that appeal to the beliefs of the masses as a reason to endorse something yourself. What people believe is one thing. What’s true is another. The lesson is that while peer pressure might be *practically* effective, it is not *epistemically* effective.

Here are three examples of this lesson in putatively fallacious thinking (along with their various nomenclature) as pulled from several critical thinking resources:

Subjectivist Fallacies: The Appeal to Majority (from a Norton textbook)⁵

This argument has the form: The majority (of people, nations, etc.) believe p ; therefore, p is true. In this case, the subjective state of large numbers of people, not just a single person, is being used as evidence for the truth of a proposition. But the argument is still subjective—and still fallacious. We can see why, once again, by identifying the implicit assumption: namely, that whatever the majority believes to be true is true. Majority opinion is obviously not infallible.

Appeal to Popularity (from a website on logical fallacies)⁶

Appeals to popularity suggest that an idea must be true simply because it is widely held. This is a fallacy because popular opinion can be, and quite often is, mistaken. Hindsight makes this clear: there were times when the majority of the population believed that the Earth is the still centre of the universe, and that diseases are caused by evil spirits; neither of these ideas was true, despite its popularity.

Argumentum ad populum (from a wiki on the rules of rational thought)⁷

Literally, “an argument to the people” [this] is the logical fallacy that just because something is popular, it is therefore true (or desirable). Undoubtedly many popular notions are true, but their truth is not a function of their popularity.

These warnings jointly conclude that appeals to the majority are fallacious. A fallacy is an argument in which the truth of the premises does not provide a reason to believe the conclusion. As such, they note that the fact that many (or most) other people believe something has no evidential bearing on the truth of that belief (though each sample text offers a slightly different explanation for why common consent lacks evidential import—more about that in §3.1). This diagnosis is squarely at odds with PCC, which claims that the fact that others believes something is a reason to believe it yourself. Should we go with the logic texts or PCC?

⁵ <http://www.wwnorton.com/college/phil/logic3/ch6/majority.htm>.

⁶ <http://www.logicalfallacies.info/relevance/appeals/appeal-to-popularity/>.

⁷ http://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Argumentum_ad_populum It’s ironic that a wiki page would fail to recognize the truth of PCC. After all, wikis are built on the idea that collaborative editing is likely to generate truthful or accurate outcomes!.

I grant that logic resources often categorize common consent arguments as fallacious. But logic textbooks get a number of things wrong, and this is one such case. As another, the so-called genetic fallacy is widely misunderstood. As Richard Joyce (2001 pp. 159–160) and others have pointed out, how a belief is formed is often relevant for the epistemic appraisal of the belief. For example, if you know that a belief source produces 75% untrue beliefs, then learning that one of your beliefs was produced in this way gives you powerful reason to doubt it. So, simply pointing out that many logic resources categorize inferences using PCC as fallacious is not a promising avenue for rejecting PCC. Instead, we need to carefully build a case for its truth. I turn to that job in Sect. 2.

2 The case for the principle of common consent

If logic textbooks don't settle the matter, how should we determine whether PCC is true or false? I offer four lines of argument for the truth of PCC. The first draws on the resources of an interpretive dilemma as sketched by Davidson and others. The second is a parity argument that appeals to conciliationist responses to the problem of peer disagreement. The third relies on an analogy to epistemic self-trust. The fourth is an inference to the best explanation showing that PCC simply explains a wide range of epistemic data. Each argument is sufficient for establishing the truth of PCC and each is independent of the others.

2.1 An interpretive dilemma

The first case for PCC concerns the interpretive dilemma that we all face when speaking with an interlocutor and a methodological point established by Donald Davidson. Suppose two anthropologists stumble upon a group of humans living in the highlands of New Guinea and realize that the members of this group speak a heretofore undocumented language. They busily set about codifying various linguistic expressions and mapping them to actions, concepts, and states of mind. Each works separately to discover the semantics, syntax, and truth conditions for the language.

At the end of a year's worth of research, the two scientists present their findings at a professional conference. According to the first, this new language should be codified in a certain way, and once codified in this way, it turns out that most of what the humans in this people group believe or say is *false*. According to the second, this new language should be codified in a different way, and once codified in this alternative way, it turns out that most of what the humans in this people group believe or say is *true*. If you know nothing at all about languages in general or this people group in particular, you still have a powerful reason to think that anthropologist two is more likely to be correct than anthropologist one.

What is that reason? It's one that turns on the methodology for determining the meaning of a foreign utterance. Davidson (1973) argues that when confronted with a foreign utterance, we face a choice point between determining the meaning of an utterance and the conditions under which the utterance is true. Given that choice, we

should assume the latter in an effort to decipher the former. In his own words, the goal is:

...to solve the problem of the interdependence of belief and meaning by holding belief constant as far as possible while solving for meaning. This is accomplished by assigning truth conditions to alien sentences that make native speakers right when plausibly possible, according, of course, to our own view of what is right. What justifies the procedure is the fact that disagreement and agreement alike are intelligible only against a background of massive agreement. Davidson (2001, p. 137)

The first anthropologist has flouted Davidson's principle of rational accommodation by fixing meaning first and truth conditions second. That's why we have more reason to trust anthropologist two's understanding of the language.

In a sense, Davidson's principle of interpretation is a more careful version of Quine's principle of charity: if you interpret your interlocutor as saying mostly false things, then you've not interpreted her properly. In other words, proper interpretation requires that you start with the assumption that your interlocutor has mostly true beliefs.

At this point it should be obvious how the principle of rational accommodation can be used to defend PCC. If you can understand your interlocutor, then you have to assume that your interlocutor has mostly true beliefs. If that's so, then finding out that your interlocutor believes that P is a reason for you to believe that P as well. After all, you are rationally compelled to assume that most of what your interlocutor believes is true, so any belief pulled at random is likely to be true. Hence, the rational solution to an interpretive dilemma we all face provides a reason to think PCC is true.

Here's an objection to this line of thought.⁸ If we interpret the principle of rational accommodation as a *prudential* norm rather than an *epistemic* one, then Davidson is right that from a practical standpoint we need to assume that our interlocutor mostly believes truly. But nothing follows from this about what we should assume from an epistemic point of view. And hence the principle of rational accommodation cannot be used to defend PCC.

This objection is clever but ultimately mistaken. To see this, return to the example of the anthropologists visiting a foreign people. The principle of rational accommodation is a principle that governs how we interpret the utterances of others. And once we have interpreted others, we can come to know what they mean when they use particular linguistic expressions. But if this is something that we genuinely know, then the principle of rational accommodation was a principle that helped us get to the truth of the matter: it wasn't just *practical* to make the assumption but *epistemically* warranted as well. The principle of rational accommodation provides us with guideposts that lead to knowledge. And if that's true, then the advice is not just prudential in nature but genuinely connected with the facts in a way that makes the advice epistemic as well.

⁸ Thanks to Duncan Pritchard for raising this objection.

2.2 The inverse of disagreement

The last twenty years or so has seen a great deal of interesting work on the problem of disagreement (Christensen 2009). From an epistemic perspective, how we should respond to the fact that other people disagree with us? Suppose you think that New York City is the capital of New York State. When you find out that your spouse disagrees with you, should you maintain your belief in the face of this disagreement, lower your confidence in your belief, or give it up entirely?

The basic idea is that other people are often epistemic peers: they care about the truth as much as we do, have roughly the same evidence that we do, have similar cognitive faculties, think about things as carefully as we do, etc. In that sense, they are about as good at getting to the truth as we are. But if that's so, then how did the two of us come to disagree?

Some philosophers think that disagreement is a reason to *conciliate* in some way. Discovering peer disagreement gives you a reason to be less confident in your belief (or even abandon it altogether). In other words, disagreement counts as a sort of higher-order evidence. Learning that you disagree with someone who is your epistemic peer provides you either with evidence that there is evidence out there that you lack or else evidence that you have misevaluated the evidence you share with someone else.

Other philosophers think that disagreement is epistemically irrelevant. Upon discovering peer disagreement, you should remain steadfast in your view, undeterred by the fact that others got it wrong. Knowledge of disagreement fails to give you a reason to back off of your initial belief.

I argue that anyone who thinks that some version of the conciliatory response to disagreement is correct should also endorse PCC. Further, even those in non-conciliationist camps that grant the views of others to have at least *some* epistemic force (e.g. Kelly) have a reason to endorse PCC. Here's why. Suppose that disagreement with others provides epistemic pressure to back off of a belief in some way. If that's so, then by parity of reasoning, agreement with others provides epistemic pressure to adopt a belief. In other words, if disagreement is higher-order evidence against a belief, then agreement is higher-order evidence in favor of a belief. As it's sometimes put: evidence of evidence is evidence (Feldman 2014). And so evidence that others believe differently from you is evidence that they've got evidence that you don't or that they understand your shared evidence differently.

This second argument for PCC, then, is a sort of inverse on the problem of disagreement. Anyone who thinks that peer disagreement presents us with an epistemic problem should also agree that peer agreement presents us with an epistemic opportunity. Evidence that others believe similarly to you is evidence that you're on the right track. Disagreement and agreement are two sides of the same epistemic coin.⁹

In other words, anyone who confronts the problem of disagreement must opt for one of the following three options:

⁹ Whether the Inverse of Disagreement argument for PCC requires adoption of the Equal Weight View of peer disagreement is unclear (though holding the Equal Weight View would be sufficient to make the argument go through). For more on the Equal Weight View, see Matheson and Carey (2013).

- A. *Both* disagreement and agreement are epistemically relevant. This is coherent position. You grant that disagreement with others gives you an epistemic reason against some claim whereas agreement with others gives you a reason for it.
- B. *Neither* disagreement nor agreement are epistemically relevant. This is also coherent. You just think that others are epistemically irrelevant all the time. Disagreement with others isn't bad, and agreement with others isn't good.
- C. *Disagreement* is epistemically relevant but *agreement* is not (or vice-versa). This is an asymmetry thesis. As such, it bears a significant theoretical burden, namely, it must make good on why disagreement is a reason to give up (or back off) a claim, but how appeals to the majority are fallacious nonetheless.

These options are exhaustive of the non ad hoc positions, and option C theoretically unpalatable. Given this, A and B are the only live options. The argument of this section is conditional: anyone who accepts option A should accept PCC.

2.3 An Analogy to the Self

I seem to see a computer in front of me. I seem to remember graduating from high school. I seem to hear students in the hallway. It seems to me that contradictions can't be true. Should I trust all of these seeming states? Or do I need an argument or some other sort of evidence before it would be epistemically reasonable to trust these experiences?

Philosophers from at least Thomas Reid have defended self-trust as an epistemic default. It's reasonable to trust that things are the way they seem unless that seeming is defeated in some way. While this sort of epistemic trust is often cashed out in terms of epistemic conservatism (like phenomenal conservatism), that's not the only way to do so. For purposes of PCC, the only assumption we need is that it's appropriate to grant some sort of initial epistemic trust in oneself.

Suppose it's reasonable to place epistemic trust in ourselves. If so, then by parity of reasoning, it is reasonable to place epistemic trust in others. That's because you are relevantly similar to others, epistemically-speaking. This sort of inference has been defended by contemporary philosophers like Richard Foley (1993, 2001) and Linda Zagzebski (2011, 2012). In brief, the inference is an argument from analogy from trust in oneself to trust in others.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide an extended argument for the premise that self-trust is the appropriate epistemic default. I will only note that a number of contemporary philosophers have defended self-trust as the only game in town. For example, Alston (1986) argues that there is no non-circular way of knowing whether our basic sources of belief are reliable, since arguments for the reliability of one will inevitably rely on premises that are defensible only by some other mode. There is no bootstrapping our way of out this dilemma. What this means is that trusting the deliverances of our faculties can't require that we antecedently show that our faculties are reliable. If it did, skepticism would loom.

The more controversial premise in the argument is the claim that we are epistemically similar to others. On its face, this seems plausible enough: humans have roughly the same perceptual faculties, reasoning ability, working memory, etc. While there are

no doubt differences across human individuals, these differences are dwarfed by the similarities.

None of this should be taken to rule out different epistemic implications in cases where we know more about the other humans in question (remember caveat number five in Sect. 1.1). For example, if you know that a group of humans believes P and that this particular group is smarter, more perceptive, or better trained than you, then this provides an even stronger reason to believe P. Or if you know that the group of humans who believes P consists of people who are less smart or knowledgeable than you, then perhaps such consent provides only a very weak reason for you to believe that P (or one that is immediately defeated given other things you know). But PCC is not narrowly tailored in either way.

In sum, the fact that I can trust my own epistemic equipment combined with the fact that my epistemic equipment is relatively similar to others provides me with a reason to trust the epistemic equipment of others. In particular, it requires me to treat myself and others on an epistemic par: if I need not show that my faculties are reliable before trusting their outputs, then I need not do so in the case of others, either. To do otherwise is to be a sort of epistemic egoist. And if I trust the epistemic equipment of others, then I have a reason to believe the outputs of that equipment.

This conclusion that we are rationally compelled to place epistemic trust in others, of course, isn't identical to a statement of PCC, but it's not difficult to see how to build a bridge. If it's reasonable to place epistemic trust in others, then when someone else believes that P, that's a reason for me to do so as well.¹⁰ After all, *ceteris paribus*, I have the same level of epistemic trust in the equipment each of us is using to understand the world.

2.4 An inference to the best explanation

My final case for PCC is an inference to the best explanation. There is a wide range of epistemic data—data about what we know, what we reasonable to believe, what we are justified in doing—that is best explained by the truth of PCC. Here is a non-exhaustive list of examples in no particular order:

- A. When you land in a foreign airport, it is reasonable to believe that baggage claim is in the direction of the largest crowd of people.
- B. Wikipedia is a reliable source of information for many topics.
- C. It is usually reasonable to dismiss conspiracy theories.
- D. You come to know how to get to the theater upon trusting a stranger's testimony.

It would be easy to list more examples, but this is enough to make the point. Let me say something about each instance listed here. It's often reasonable to follow the

¹⁰ Does PCC have bootstrapping or easy-knowledge sorts of implications? If the fact that someone else believes that P gives me a reason to believe that P, then, does the epistemic parity argument imply that the fact that I believe that P is an *additional* reason to believe that P? No. Here's why. The epistemic boost for P that is provided by the beliefs of others is parasitic on the fact that others are epistemic peers. So, it's really the similarity to my own epistemic circumstances that provides the reason to endorse P. But I can't then cite my OWN epistemic circumstances as an *additional* reason on behalf of P. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for *Synthese* for raising this possibility.

crowd when you don't know where you are. The simplest explanation of this fact is that members of the crowd have a true belief you lack. PCC explains why you have a reason to follow the crowd in these sorts of cases.

Contrary to what is taught in my local middle school, Wikipedia is a largely reliable source of information. Why that is so has to do with theorems about the wisdom of the crowd. That means that expert belief isn't the only kind of reason you can cite in favor of a belief. In fact, in many circumstances, you are more likely to get to the truth of something by relying on a group of non-experts rather than the word of a *single* authority. Kelly (2011(p. 151)) cites a particularly poignant pop culture example of this phenomenon: if you were a contestant back in the 1990s on the popular game show *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*, you would be far more likely to get the right answer to a tricky question by polling the crowd (91%) rather than phoning an expert (65%). PCC explains why it's reasonable to trust crowds in this way.

Pick your favorite conspiracy theory: the US never landed on the moon, jet contrails are poisons for mind-control, Bush planned 9/11, Jews are controlling all of the world's wealth, etc. Hopefully you think the conspiracy theory you selected is false. But why? What justifies this dismissal? After all, a carefully-crafted conspiracy theory will be consistent with all or almost all of the evidence commonly available. Conspiracy theories are often as simple as alternative explanations. Conspiracy theories are often just as falsifiable as alternative explanations. And yet we think it's reasonable to deny them.

Why? It's not appeals to epistemic principles about simplicity, falsification, available evidence, etc. that explain why it's reasonable to go with the story held by the majority over the minority conspiracy theory. And if you're like almost any of the rest of us, you don't have access to any special data, insider information, or personal experience that would show why it's more reasonable to go with standard explanations over conspiracy theories. Instead, you trust the majority opinion and dismiss the conspiracy theorists as crackpots. If that's a reasonable attitude to take, PCC would do a nice job of explaining this epistemic fact.

Finally, suppose you're lost, and you stop to ask for directions. Defenders of the epistemic potency of testimony claim that information provided by a total stranger can provide you with knowledge or justified belief. I concur. But *why*? PCC provides a simple explanation: people are typically inclined to report their beliefs accurately, and if someone believes something, then you have a reason to believe it, too. On this way of looking at it, PCC is a more basic epistemic principle than many of the others in the debate over the epistemic quality of testimony.

3 Objections

Every position has its objections. Here are the five objections to the principle of common consent that are either common, important, or both. They all fail.

3.1 Other people are not infallible

Other people make epistemic mistakes. Sometimes, they make fantastic mistakes. Exhibit A: the members of the Flat Earth Society. We shouldn't place epistemic trust in others given this kind of track record. But PCC says that we should. Hence, PCC is false.

This objection is included because it's apparently popular. Looking back on the explanations for why an appeal to the majority should count as a fallacy recounted in §1.3 is instructive. One source says that it's a fallacy to reason in this way because "majority opinion is obviously not infallible" whereas another notes that this way of reasoning "is a fallacy because popular opinion can be, and quite often is, mistaken."

But the objection is not any good. It's true that other people are fallible. But that doesn't disqualify them as a source of information. Virtually all of our sources of information are fallible, and yet it's often reasonable to trust your vision, memory, etc. PCC doesn't state that the beliefs of others provide a conclusive or certain or infallible reason to believe something. Instead, PCC says that the beliefs of others provide *a* reason for you to believe something. So, this objection misses the target.

3.2 PCC is self-undermining

PCC says that if someone else believes something, then I have a reason to believe it, too. So, what happens if it turns out that most people believe that PCC is false? Under those conditions, if PCC is true, we have a strong reason to disbelieve it. Hence, PCC is self-undermining.

This objection tracks a similar dialectic in the epistemology of disagreement. Conciliationists think that peer disagreement is an epistemic problem. But evidently lots of people disagree, including many philosophers who defend views inconsistent with conciliationism. In that case, if conciliationism is true, then conciliationists have a reason to give up their conciliationism.

This objection doesn't pose a serious problem for PCC. First, at best it would show that the truth of PCC generates at least one reason to disbelieve it. That's much different from showing that PCC is false or unreasonable all things considered (see point six in §1.1). Second, as an empirical matter, there's not good reason to think that there is widespread disbelief in PCC. In fact, normal people probably don't think about epistemic principles like PCC much at all. (Further, the fact that logic books harp on the fallacy of the appeal to the majority actually suggests that most people operate with a tacit kind of acceptance of PCC!) Third, I grant that there is widespread disbelief in PCC in certain philosophical circles. And I concede that, given the truth of PCC, this gives me at least one reason to disbelieve it, too. But I think this reason is swamped by all of the other evidence in favor of PCC, including the case built over the course of this paper.

3.3 Other people aren't epistemic peers

The next objection doesn't deny the spirit of PCC, but it requires a modification of the principle that can then be exploited by those attempting to show that it rarely, if ever, applies. The modification concerns the scope of 'others' in the antecedent. Whereas PCC says that the fact that any person or other believes something is a reason for me to believe it too, this particular objection restricts the scope of 'other' to epistemic peers. And then to gut PCC of any serious epistemic work, the objector claims that—as a contingent matter of fact—other people are rarely, if ever, my peers.

As an example of this sort of objection, consider Elizabeth Fricker's denial of a view she calls modest epistemic universalism. Fricker (2014) defines modest epistemic universalism as the view that "the established fact of another's belief that P is grounds to accept P" in those worlds in which we discover that others share our similar cognitive equipment (p. 180 and 182). Instead, she writes:

...[the] use of one's own faculties to acquire beliefs in the actual world does not lead to an empirical basis for modest epistemic universalism. What one finds out is, not that all humans are epistemically reliable about interesting topics just in virtue of their similar human cognitive equipment, but that reliability is an idiosyncratic matter, turning on contingencies of temperament and experience—training, education, research, and so forth. (p. 199)

Fricker thus argues that whether any given person counts as a peer depends on contingent features like experience, training, or education. She concludes that the mere fact that someone believes something doesn't—all by itself—give me a reason to believe it, too. That would follow only if I can confirm that the person in question has the experience, training, or education to make her an epistemic peer. That provides her with a reason to deny modest epistemic universalism—a view that's quite close to PCC.

This won't work. The objector is trying to have her cake and eat it, too, and the analogy to self-trust makes this clear. We don't trust ourselves or our own faculties *only after* we've evaluated our own contingent circumstances. We trust ourselves *before* we have much by way of experience, training, or education. Indeed, we have no other option: as Alston and others have shown (and as Fricker concedes on 178–9), it's impossible to gather evidence for local reliability without assuming the very point in question.

Instead, we trust ourselves as a *precondition* to investigating our own experience, training, education, etc. As Zagzebski (2011) puts it:

My commitment to trust my conscientiously formed beliefs about other people means I cannot consistently expect evidence of the reliability of another person before thinking of them as epistemically trustworthy. (p. 29)

So, if the objection comes down to claiming that we can trust ourselves without establishing our reliability but we can trust other people only after establishing their peer-hood, it runs afoul of the self-trust argument from §2.3. None of this negates the fact that things like education, training, etc. are epistemically important. They are. But

they are not reasons to deny PCC. Instead, they function as epistemic boosts or defeaters relevant for sorting out our all-things-considered reasons to believe something.

3.4 The Brooklyn bridge objection

When I was a kid, I sometimes defended my actions by appeal to the fact that some of my friends did the same thing. My mother's response was an American classic: if your friend jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge, would you do the same thing? She had me: the fact that someone else did something wasn't a good enough reason for me to do it, too. But if the *actions* of others don't give me a reason to emulate them, then why should the *beliefs* of others give me a reason to agree with them?¹¹ The principle analogous to PCC but about action instead of belief is false, and that provides a reason to think that PCC is false as well.

This is an interesting objection, but not a fatal one. There is a relevant difference between belief and action that shows why PCC is true even though its action-guiding analog is false. The difference comes at the level of personal goals or objectives. In terms of action, our goals are diverse. The fact that the guy next to you orders a particular item off of a menu isn't a reason to think that it will best suit your gustatory goals.

But in terms of beliefs, our goals are typically quite similar: we want the truth.¹² What we DO once we get the truth is a function of our preferences—which differ widely—but we all want the most accurate map of the world possible so that we maximize our chances of getting the things we want. True belief is (at least) instrumentally useful. And that's why the beliefs of others give you a reason for emulation whereas the actions of others do not. Your friend's belief that it will rain tomorrow is a reason for you to think it that it will rain tomorrow, too. But your friend's decision to leave her husband isn't a reason for you to do the same.

3.5 This point is dialectically useless

The final objection I'll consider relates to the dialectical uselessness of appeals to PCC. If you're in a debate with someone else over whether or not P is true, it doesn't strengthen your case to note that your position is in the majority. That's simply neither here nor there. Your interlocutor may likely know that her position is a minority one and not care. As Kelly (2011) puts it, "When philosophers argue for and against claims by offering reasons, they do not cite surveys of public opinion... the actual distribution of opinion with respect to a philosophical view has no normative significance what-

¹¹ Thanks to Adam Carter for raising this objection.

¹² I note that there are some sub-sets of beliefs in which truth is probably NOT our goal. A good example of this subset is political beliefs. In that arena, it's plausible that our goals to get to the truth are weak and often trumped by more potent goals like fitting in with those around us or signaling tribal membership. If that's true, then PCC will have limited value in these sorts of contexts because it will be subject to a defeater. For more on this, see chapter 3 of McBrayer (2020).

soever,” (p. 137). But if PCC were true, the distribution of a position (philosophical or otherwise) would have normative significance. Hence, PCC is false.¹³

The objection is right about at least this much: experts (and ordinary people) often fail to cite empirical facts about belief distribution as reasons in favor of their respective positions. But there are three ways to explain this practice that are consistent with the truth of PCC.

On the first, it could be that belief distribution is recognized as epistemically potent but then defeated by the first-order arguments and evidence under consideration (cf. Kelly 2005). When experts are engaged in an argument, they are typically looking for first-order reasons (or evidence) that speak directly for or against some view. In that context, citing common consent will not give one’s interlocutor what she seeks. She knows THAT others hold a particular view, but she wants to know WHY they hold that view. In essence, the focus on the first-order arguments “screens off” the epistemic boost provided by belief distribution. If that’s so, it wouldn’t show that the belief distribution was normatively insignificant. At best it would show that this significance is *pro tanto*, something that is granted by PCC.

On the second, perhaps people don’t cite the distribution of belief because they assume that this reason has already been factored into the debate. If you’re arguing for an obviously minority position with someone, there is no need for either side to dwell on the obvious: both sides recognize the uphill battle faced by the minority position.

On the third, in many cases people don’t cite the beliefs of others in their case for the truth of a claim because they mistakenly think that the beliefs of others are epistemically irrelevant. Perhaps they had the misfortune of taking a logic class in which they were taught that an appeal to the masses is a fallacy. Or perhaps they haven’t yet read this paper. In either case, the fact that people *don’t* do something that they *should* do provides only a weak objection to PCC.

4 Conclusion

The Principle of Common Consent is true. The fact that another believes P is a reason for me to do so as well. Accepting PCC elucidates connections across discussions of logical fallacies (like the putative *ad populum* fallacy), the epistemology of disagreement, philosophy of language (like the principle of rational accommodation), and the epistemology of testimony. Our philosophical worldviews are more coherent with PCC in the mix.

Furthermore, the truth of PCC highlights the more general epistemic lesson that justification and reasonable belief are cheap. It’s easy to have a belief that is *prima facie* justified. It’s easy to gather some reasons for a claim. Views like common-sense philosophy and phenomenal conservatism have long championed this approach to epistemology. The real philosophical work comes down to the difficult process of developing defeaters, comparing reasons, and determining where our all-things-considered reasons lie.

¹³ Thanks to Patrick Todd for raising this objection.

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