Walton’s latest—as usual, a study in argumentation and informal logic—concentrates upon *argumentum ad populam*, or “argument to the people.” Standard logic and critical thinking texts treat this argument-form as fallacious, plain and simple—the fact that (most) everyone accepts some proposition is no good reason to think that it is true. Walton, however, argues that we ought to have more respect for this common and not altogether uncomplicated kind of argument. Indeed, he points out, appeal to popular opinion is problematic just because we so often employ it in practical and political deliberation, even as we tend to distrust its claims. “Despite the justified suspicion about... appeal to popular opinion... a democratic system of government must ultimately be based on the presumption that this type of argument is reasonable” (28).

The book first distinguishes two questions: how one decides what popular opinion actually is, and what conclusions one can rightly draw from it. On the first, Walton is mostly silent, and concentrates on the use (legitimate or not) of such opinion in argument. While early sections criticize unreflective reliance on polls to gauge public sentiment, the book as a whole is more interested in what to do with said sentiment, once it has been determined. Walton proposes to complicate the issue, by distinguishing a variety of contexts in which appeals to popular opinion may appear, and a corresponding variety of ways in which to evaluate their use.

Walton is surely right that appeals to popular opinion is hardly avoidable, and much of what he says is pure common sense. As he points out, the standard treatment is genuinely unsatisfactory. While popular opinion rarely figures in deductively valid arguments—excepting perhaps arguments about what that opinion actually is, rather than whether it is true—there is more to life than deductive validity. In keeping with this sentiment, Walton’s fifth chapter presents a capsule history of “dialectic,” the theory and practice of reasonable but non-deductive argument. The material referenced in this discussion is quite interesting, and someone wanting an introduction to argumentation theory before the Enlightenment (when, Walton thinks, deductive validity became the single standard of acceptable argument) could do well to begin here, turning to the other works discussed for more in-depth study.

Following the historical survey, Walton presents his own account of “the new dialectic” (chapter 6; also the subject of his recent book of the same title). He argues that argument are best evaluated as they appear in dialogues, complementary conversational exercises to any one of a variety of common ends. Some contexts of discussion are simply unconcerned with deductive validity, and we ought not fault arguments appearing in those contexts (including instances of *argumentum ad populam*) for failure to meet those standards. Those of us who have attempted to motivate students to analyse “fallacies” in advertisements may well sympathize with Walton’s account of the matter (247–9). As he quite rightly points out, it is generally only naive at best to treat advertising copy as if it were intended to present reasoned arguments—at worst, it may be an exercise in irrelevancy.
Surely, we owe it to advertising to recognize that it is not usually in the business of argumentation after all—which point, Walton claims, nearly everyone already understands.

What, then, of popular appeals in discussion which does mean to be reasoned and argumentative? Here, things are a little less clear. Walton makes a persuasive case for the cogency of the Aristotelian distinction between proper uses of public opinion (endoxa) and “merely persuasive” or “rhetorical” uses of same (143). That is, he makes a good case for there being such a distinction between uses, while leaving it somewhat unclear how we are to determine which are which. The difficulties he notes in Plato’s treatment of the relationship between genuinely compelling argument and merely sophistical persuasion (1303) are not entirely dissipated. While it is true that Plato sometimes presents Socrates as appealing to the opinions of his audience, or of persons at large (Walton discusses the Protagoras, and the Gorgias also comes to mind), these cases are almost always limited to discussions with persons who purport, as teachers or politicians, to speak on behalf of the public and the common good. In such cases, surely, the use of argumentum ad populum is relatively straightforward, and mainly acceptable—if one claims to speak for the people, then the actual opinions of the people are surely relevant to the truth of those claims. Outside of this sort of context, however, matters are not so clear. Plato and Aristotle both struggled with the question of when a society could be said to provide for properly knowledgeable public opinion, and the issue remains open even now. For his part, Walton does not attempt to solve the problem and, while this is certainly reasonable given its magnitude, it does leave a large part of the task undone.

In the end, the main claim of the book turns out to be relatively modest. Appeal to popular opinion, Walton says, may lend some weight to one side of a deliberative or persuasive discussion, after all, so long as that opinion is adequately informed, and open to further reasoned deliberation and possible change. At the same time, the role played here is very small. Indeed, the Gricean conversational “Maxim of Nondisputativeness” (238–41), which Walton would have us accept when we try to persuade others (or when others try to persuade us), counsels simply that we ought to accept claims about popular opinion only if we already basically accept the content of those claims, and only if they seem to pose no foreseeable problems for our own point of view. This advice is hardly controversial, but it leaves popular appeals in argument looking mainly inert. On the one hand, then, Walton persuades us that deductive proof is certainly not the only acceptable standard of argument, and that we must accept inferences which are materially adequate, and not just logically valid. On the other hand, however, the positive value of argumentum ad populum, even after his extensive treatment, remains in question.

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