COMMUNIS ANIMI CONCEPTIO
The self-evident statement

In his treatise *De Corpore et Sanguine Domini*, Lanfranc casti-
gates Berengar for basing his argument on premisses which are
neither self-evidently true, nor capable of being substantiated by
other statements which are self-evidently true:

> argumenti quippe locum necesse est, aut per se esse
certum, aut certis rationibus approbatum.

If the topics, or building-blocks, of argumentation are not
sound, the most carefully-constructed edifice will fall down. For
Lanfranc and his immediate successors, at least, it seems that
these ‘units of argument’ fell, broadly, into two categories. The
statements of Scriptural, patristic, even secular *auctores* carried
an authority which meant that they required no corroborative
‘proof’. Secondly, there were statements which were acceptable
to everyone because their truth was immediately recognisable;
these were topics, or commonplaces.

The notion of the self-evident statement had a complex his-
tory. In Cicero’s *Topics* and in Boethius’ Commentaries on both
the Ciceronian and the Aristotelian *Topics* — as well as his own
monograph *De Differentiis Topicis* — mediaeval scholars found
discussions of the art of finding arguments (*inventio*). These
arguments, or topics, carry weight in a discussion because of
their general acceptability. R. McKeon has said that invention
‘extends from the construction of formal arguments to all
modes of enlarging reason by experience as manifested in awa-
reness, emotion, interest and appreciation'. The topic comes to
claim assent at an emotional, as well as at a purely intellectual
level, but its primary purpose is to appeal to a common sense of

'rightness', because it appears on first hearing to be self-evidently true.

We are here concerned, not so much with the recognition of the meaning of single words, as with the recognition of the truth of a general statement, or of a common notion. Boethius had a phrase for it, a phrase which he employed in the De Hebdomadibus: communis animi conceptio. 'A common conception of the mind is a statement which anyone accepts as soon as he hears it.' Boethius distinguishes two kinds: the commonplace which all men understand (ut omnium sit hominum), and that which only the trained mind understands, but which is, in its turn, derived from ordinary commonplaces. To illustrate the first, he cites an axiom of Euclid: if equals are taken from equals, the remainders are equal. For the second, he suggests the statement that 'things which are incorporeal are not in space'. Boethius clearly has in mind the refined and abstracted self-evident axiom or principle of a formal body of knowledge. Even the simple can grasp primary axioms, although the more advanced theorems which depend upon them may be evidently true only to those who have studied and mastered the foundation principles.

Boethius' twelfth century commentators follow his line of thought here. Gilbert of la Porrée, in his commentary on the De Hebdomadibus, enlarges:

Certum est quod et qui vocantur 'communes loci' rhetorum et 'maxime propositiones' dialecticorum et 'theorematum' geometricarum et 'anxiomatam' musicorum et 'generales sententiae' ethicorum seu philosophorum continentur universalitate huius regule qua dicitur:

Communis animi conceptio est enuntiatio quam quisque probat auditum.

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5. Gilbert of Portiers Commentaries on Boethius, ed. N. M. Häring, Toronto, 1966, pp. 189.66-190.75. M. D. Chenu notices both this reference and that of Alan of Lille which follows, in Un essai de méthode théologique au xiiie siècle, in Revue de Sciences philosophiques et théologiques 24 (1935), pp. 259-267, where his interest lies in the notion of the rule or principle itself rather than in that of the self-evident statement.
In his view, the axioms of geometry, the principles and *regulae* of every other art, are all self-evident commonplaces. Alan of Lille’s *Regulae Theologicae* makes the same point:

> et quasi quibusdam terminis certis clauduntur, ut dialectica regulas habet quas maximas vocat, rhetorica locos communes, ethica generales sententias, physica aphorismos, arithmetica porismata, id est regulas subtile... sunt et axiomata musicorum, quae sunt regulae artis musicae, quae dicuntur axiomata...  

He emphasises that if the principles of the *artes* and of every other branch of human learning are self-evidently true and universally recognizable in this way, then the axioms of theology, doctrinal principles, must have a compelling quality of self-evidentness which amounts to a categorical necessity:

> Necessitas theologicarum maximarum absoluta est, et irrefragibilis, quia de his fidem faciunt quae actu, vel naturam, mutari non possint.

Their cogency carries more than a persuasive force. It is impossible not to recognise their rightness. But here, too, Alan is dealing with abstract notions, generated by formal study, rather than with commonplaces in the modern sense of the term; these are ‘topics’ in a technical sense.

Thierry of Chartres’ commentaries on Boethius take up several of the points which have been made. In his remarks on the *De Trinitate*, he explains how the human mind conceives an idea, which it is capable of comprehending before it has the opportunity of connecting this abstraction with exterior or material reality:

> Animus enim concipit formam et compositionem alciuis artificii formans id quod in mente est antequam connectat materie sed circa materiam.

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7. Ibid.
When he meets the corresponding reality, or when he hears a statement, a man recognizes what he hears or sees. Thus Thierry’s remarks come close to Augustine’s view of the nature of man’s understanding of language. On the *De Hebdomadibus* passage, Thierry’s views are preserved in only a single fragment. *Communis animi conceptio*, he says, means what is self-evident: *per se notum describit*. What a man finds self-evident is what he accepts as soon as he understands it:

*quod quisque probat postquam illud intelligit.*

‘What we call self-evident is what this authority calls a common conception of the mind’. He renders Boethius’ distinction between the universally commonplace, and what is self-evident only to the learned, as: *per se notum absolute*, and *per se notum ... inter doctos*. Up to a point this distinction may be said to marry well with the difference between the axioms and principles and rules of the arts and sciences, which are self-evident only to the learned, and the general commonplaces with which every student of rhetoric was taught to furnish himself as a matter of course because of their universal appeal.

But both types of common conception — the simple and the advanced — fall into the category of self-evident statements; the common proverb and the advanced geometrical axiom are both commonplaces in that they rest, ultimately, upon no proof; they are in themselves units of argument. Herein lies their interest and importance in the study of mediaeval argumentation. Mediaeval methods and techniques of argumentation have always aroused interest; perhaps less has been said about the grounds on which rested the ultimate authority of those component statements which did not possess the *auctoritas* of a quoted text, but which were manifestly acceptable to sheer common-sense: the *communis animi conceptiones*.

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