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**THE COMMONLY ACCEPTED STATEMENT
(TO OMOLOGOYMENON) AS A STARTING POINT
FOR A THEOLOGICAL DISCUSSION
– EUNOMIUS AND GREGORY OF NYSSA****

It surprised me a lot when I found out when translating *Contra Eunomium* by Gregory of Nyssa that after customary insults Gregory focused on argumentation based on the “commonly accepted” statement (τὸ ὁμολογούμενον) and devoted the major part of the first book to pointing out that what Eunomius preached as commonly accepted was actually commonly denied. My surprise comes from the fact that at the first glance such an argument seems to be ineffective and irrelevant. What can be proved or refuted with the sole statement that it is or it is not commonly accepted? It surprised me even more to learn that it was customary in the 4th century’s theological discussions to invoke such argumentation¹. Therefore, I have decided to search for its possible sources.

In the last few decades the Eunomian controversy has been thoroughly studied by many scholars. The original writings of the main parties of the conflict have been recently edited²; three congresses on Gregory of Nyssa have been dedicated to the three books of *Contra Eunomium* by Gregory of Nyssa, all followed by publications with English translations and many studies on

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¹ Athanasius of Alexandria, for example, claimed that all people agreed that Christ is the Son of God (ὁμολογούμενον ὑπὸ πάντων εἶναι Θεοῦ Υἱόν); cf. idem, *De incarnatione Verbi* 30, PG 25, 149A, and that all agreed that He is God (τὸν Κύριον ὑπὸ πάντων ὁμολογούμενον Θεόν), cf. idem, *Orationes contra arianos* III, PG 26, 468A. Nemesius Emesenus confirmed that the syllogisms should be deduced not from what is dubious, but from what is commonly agreed (οὐ δεῖ δὲ ἐκ ἀμφιβαλλομένων συνάγειν τοὺς συλλογισμοὺς ἀλλ’ ἐκ ὁμολογουμένων), cf. idem, *De natura hominis* II, PG 40, 549A.

² Cf. Gregorius Nyssenus, *Contra Eunomium*, ed. W. Jaeger, GNO 1-2, Leiden 1960; Basilius Caesariensis, *Contre Eunome*, ed. et trad. B. Sesboüé – G.M. de Durant – L. Doutreleau, SCh 299, Paris 1982 and SCh 305, Paris 1983; two editions of Eunomius’s *Apology: Apologie*, éd. et trad. B. Sesboüé – G.M. de Durant – L. Doutreleau, SCh 305, 234-298 and *Liber Apologeticus*, ed. and transl. R.P. Vaggione, in: Eunomius, *The Extant Works*, Oxford 1987.

the subject: the first one in Pamplona in 1986³, the second one in Olomouc in 2004⁴ and the third one in Leuven in 2010⁵. It could seem that all possible aspects of those writings have been already examined and clarified, but I have found nothing that would strictly refer to the methodology of the polemic. Even the recent book by Mathieu Cassin about the literary aspects of Eunomius' and Gregory's writings⁶, detailed and erudite, does not concern methodological issues.

Having no tips from others, I have decided to analyze the originals. I started with the very texts of Eunomius and Gregory of Nyssa, and then I looked for possible sources of the term τὸ ὁμολογούμενον.

Both Eunomius and Gregory of Nyssa listed the same three types of arguments that should be used in the debate:

1. αἱ κοινὰ ἔννοιαι – natural, common notions which are identified with τὸ ὁμολογούμενον – commonly accepted statement;
2. teaching of the fathers and/or philosophers;
3. testimony of the Holy Scripture.

In his *Liber Apologeticus*, Eunomius claims that his teaching stays in line with both natural knowledge and the teaching of the fathers:

“It is, therefore, in accordance both with innate knowledge (κατὰ τε φυσικὴν ἔννοιαν) and the teaching of the fathers that we have made our confession that God is one, that he was brought into being neither by his own action nor by that of any other, for each of these is equally impossible”⁷.

In another place of the same book, he invokes the Scripture and common notions:

“The Scriptures themselves clearly state, «God exists before the ages» and the common reckoning (αἱ κοινὰ ἔννοιαι) of mankind confirms them”⁸.

Finally, he uses the argument that something is not commonly agreed to prove his own teaching:

³ Publication: *El „Contra Eunomium I” en la produccion literaria de Gregorio de Nisa: VI Coloquio Internacional sobre Gregorio de Nisa*, ed. L.F. Mateo-Seco – J.L. Bastero, Pamplona 1988.

⁴ Publication: *Contra Eunomium II: An English Version with Supporting Studies: Proceedings of the 10th International Colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa (Olomouc, September 15-18, 2004)*, ed. L. Karfikova – S. Douglass – J. Zachhuber, Leiden – Boston 2007.

⁵ Publication: *Gregory of Nyssa: Contra Eunomium III: an English translation with commentary and supporting studies: proceedings of the 12th International Colloquium On Gregory Of Nyssa (Leuven, 14-17 September 2010)*, Leuven 2014.

⁶ Cf. M. Cassin, *L'écriture de la controverse chez Grégoire de Nysse. Polémique littéraire et exégèse dans le Contre Eunome*, Paris 2012.

⁷ Eunomius, *Liber Apologeticus* 7, ed. and transl. by R.P. Vaggione, in: Eunomius, *The Extant Works*, Oxford 1987, 41.

⁸ *Ibidem* 10, ed. and transl. Vaggione, p. 45-47.

“If both of these are admittedly (ὁμολογουμένως) ridiculous, then the remaining possibility must be correct: that granted the effects had a start, the action is not without beginning, and granted the effects come to an end, the action is not without ending”⁹.

Gregory of Nyssa more clearly enumerates three types of evidence:

“Neither do we know any of the philosophers outside the faith who have made this mad statement, nor does such a thing agree with either divinely inspired texts or common notions (ταῖς κοιναῖς ἐννοίαις)”¹⁰.

Eunomius and Gregory surely equated common notions with the commonly accepted statement which was (I will show that latter on) a normal practice at their times. Gregory, however, rarely used the expression “common notions” (αἱ κοιναὶ ἐννοιαὶ) and in nearly all cases when quoting Basil. His favorite term was τὸ ὁμολογούμενον; that is why I will focus on it. It is not a technical term and Gregory used the verb ὁμολογέω and the participle derived from it often in the meaning “to admit”. But I found in *Contra Eunomium* at least 36 places¹¹ where the participle τὸ ὁμολογούμενον (and less frequently the verb ὁμολογέω) undoubtedly means “commonly agreed” in a very specific, philosophical sense.

It is worth quoting at least one of those excerpts to see the way of Gregory’s argumentation:

“For who does not know that every argument takes its first principles from things manifest and generally agreed (ἐκ τῶν φανερῶν τε καὶ πᾶσιν ἐγνωσμένων), and thereby brings assurance in matters in dispute, and no unknown thing would ever be apprehended, if things assented to (τῶν ὁμολογουμένων) did not lead us by the hand to the understanding of the obscure? But if the things we take as first principles of arguments for the clarification of things unknown were in conflict with the apprehensions of ordinary people, they would hardly be the means to clarifying the unknown. The whole conflict and doctrinal dispute between the churchmen and the Anomeans is about whether we should consider the Son and the Spirit to be created, as our opponents say, or of the uncreated nature, as the church’s faith holds. So Eunomius asserts that very thing which everyone denies as being agreed (ὡς ὁμολογούμενον), and without seeking and evidence that the subsequent being is the work of the one that precedes, he boldly decrees that it is so, get-

⁹ Ibidem 23, ed. and transl. Vaggione, p. 65.

¹⁰ Gregorius Nyssenus, *Contra Eunomium* I 186, GNO 1, 81, 16-18, transl. S. Hall, *A refutation of the first book of the two published by Eunomius after the decease of holy Basil*, in: *El “Contra Eunomium I” en la produccion literaria de Gregorio de Nisa*, p. 62.

¹¹ Cf. ibidem I 166; I 219-221; I 225; I 228; I 238; I 258; I 278; I 361; I 404; I 431; I 469; I 486; I 497 (here, there is a compound διωμολόγηται); I 581; I 582; I 622; II 170; II 214; II 356; II 544; II 550; II 551; II 554; II 610; III 1, 19; III 1, 23; III 1, 32; III 1, 138; III 2, 35; III 2, 58; III 2, 114; III 2, 116; III 2, 118; III 2, 150; III 2, 156; III 6, 52; III 8, 5.

ting his boldness from I know not what training or philosophy. If assent (τὴν ὁμολογίαν) should, as something uncontested and undisputed, precede every argument and demonstration, so that the unknown is shown as strictly deriving from the premiss through the intervening arguments, then the one who proposes the subject of inquiry as an argument for yet further things merely argues from ignorance to ignorance and from deceit to deceit. That is to make oneself a blind leader of the blind, as the Gospel says”¹².

We do not have the text of *Apologia apologiae* by Eunomius, so we have to believe Gregory that Eunomius as well as Gregory himself used the argument of “the commonly agreed statement” as a starting point for his teaching. My question is: why such an argument was so crucial that for both parties to the conflict it seemed to be an irrefutable proof of rightness? Why did they not use the Holy Scripture as the first and the last argument? I think the answer is quite simple. That theological dispute was strictly scientific in terms of those times. The participle ὁμολογούμενον leads us to the philosophical sources of the methodology of that debate.

1. Τὸ ὁμολογούμενον in Ancient philosophy. The verb ὁμολογέω and the participle τὸ ὁμολογούμενον were used already by Plato¹³, but in the sense *to accept*. It was Aristotle who gave that verb a specific philosophical meaning. According to Aristotle a deictic proof starts with the commonly agreed statements:

“Proof per impossible differs from ostensive proof in that the former posits that which it intends to refute by reducing it to an admitted fallacy, whereas the latter proceeds from admitted positions (ἡ δὲ δεικτική [ἀπόδειξις] ἄπξεται ἐξ ὁμολογουμένων θέσεων)”¹⁴.

“How then can the person who is trying to define prove the essence or definition? He cannot exhibit deductively from admitted facts (ἐξ ὁμολογουμένων) that, given these facts, a conclusion distinct from them must follow – that is demonstration (ἀπόδειξις)”¹⁵.

Demonstration (ἀπόδειξις) is a type of syllogism, but a very specific one. Mario Mignucci stresses that the difference between ἀπόδειξις and any other syllogism does not consist in the form, but only in the content – the premiss must be true as true derives only from true¹⁶. According to Aristotle, scientific proofs are *sensu stricto* deictic syllogisms. Tadeusz Kwiatkowski explains that

¹² Ibidem I 219-221, GNO 1, 90, 11 - 91, 9, transl. Hall, p. 67.

¹³ Cf. Plato, *Cratylus* 387a-d; idem, *Philebus* 28e.

¹⁴ Aristoteles, *Analytica priora* II 14, 62b, ed. and transl. H. Tredennick, in: Aristotle, *The Categories, On Interpretation, Prior Analytics*, LCL 325, London 1962, 472-473.

¹⁵ Idem, *Analytica posteriora* II 7, 92a, ed. and transl. H. Tredennick, in: Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics, Topica*, LCL 391, London 1960, 194-195.

¹⁶ Cf. M. Mignucci, *La teoria aristotelica della scienza*, Firenze 1965, 110-111.

a syllogistic form is an obligate condition of the strictly scientific demonstration, but it is not sufficient. Informal elements decide about the scientific character of the demonstration and those elements are the specific character of the premisses¹⁷. We have just read the excerpts where Aristotle stated that it is τὸ ὁμολογούμενον that constitutes the premiss of true syllogism that provides absolute knowledge. In another place of *Analytica posteriora* he described the premiss demonstrative syllogism without using the participle ὁμολογούμενον:

“Our contention now is that we do at any rate obtain knowledge by demonstration. By demonstration I mean a syllogism which produces scientific knowledge, in other words one which enables us to know by the mere fact that we grasp it. Now if knowledge is such as we have assumed, demonstrative knowledge must proceed from premisses which are true, primary, immediate, better known than, prior to, and causative of the conclusion (ἐξ ἀληθῶν τ’ εἶναι καὶ πρώτων καὶ ἀμέσων καὶ γνωριμωτέρων καὶ προτέρων καὶ αἰτίων τοῦ συμπεράσμενος)”¹⁸.

So it is not enough to say that for Aristotle τὸ ὁμολογούμενον means “a commonly accepted statement”, it means much more: a statement (premiss) that is “true, primary, immediate, better known than, prior to, and causative of the conclusion”.

We do find very similar definition of demonstration in Chrysippus; he defines a demonstration as a reasoning that uncovers an unproved thing through deduction from the commonly accepted premisses (ἀπόδειξις ἐστὶ λόγος δι’ ὁμολογουμένων λημμάτων κατὰ συναγωγὴν ἐπιφορὰν ἐκκαλύπτων ἄδηλον)¹⁹. As only fragments of his works have been preserved we can only assume that he could mean the same as Aristotle did.

2. Terms and ideas. Many scholars think that another term used more frequently by Aristotle i.e. ἔνδοξον means “commonly accepted”²⁰ (it was translated as such by Hugh Tredennick), although there are some suggestions that ἔνδοξον means probable²¹, “reputable” or “respectable”²².

Let’s take a careful look at the very text by Aristotle where he defines ἔνδοξον:

“Reasoning is dialectical which reasons from generally accepted opinions (ἐξ ἐνδόξων). Things are true and primary which command belief through

¹⁷ Cf. T. Kwiatkowski, *Poznanie naukowe u Arystotelesa*, Warszawa 1969, 94.

¹⁸ Aristoteles, *Analytica posteriora* II 2, 71b, ed. and transl Tredennick, p. 30-31.

¹⁹ Chrysippus, fr. 266, in: Sextus, *Adversus Mathematicos* VIII 310, SVF II 314.

²⁰ Cf. T. Irwin, *Aristotle’s first principles*, Oxford 1990, 494, note 42.

²¹ Cf. Kwiatkowski, *Poznanie naukowe u Arystotelesa*, p. 25; P. Aubenque, *Le problème de l’être chez Aristote*, Paris 1966, 258-259.

²² Cf. J. Barnes – M. Bonelli, *Method and Metaphysics: Essays in Ancient Philosophy*, Oxford 2011, 166.

themselves and not through anything else; for regarding the first principles of science it is unnecessary to ask any further question as to «why», but each principle should of itself command belief. Generally accepted opinions (ἔνδοξα δέ), on the other hand, are those which commend themselves to all or to the majority or to the wise – that is, to all of the wise or to the majority or to the most famous and distinguished of them”²³.

I am sure (on the basis of above-quoted texts) that τὸ ὁμολογούμενον hides here behind the adjectives “true and primary” (διὰ τινῶν πρώτων καὶ ἀληθῶν) and the conjunction δέ (translated by Edward Seymour Forster with the expression “on the other hand”) points out the difference between ὁμολογούμενον and ἔνδοξον. That interpretation is confirmed by Alexander of Aphrodisias who commented on that excerpt as follows:

“After speaking about demonstration he next speaks about the dialectical syllogism. He says that it is the syllogism which proceeds through approved (premisses). After saying this, he next explains which are those true and primary (premisses) through which he has said the demonstrative syllogism proceeds, and which are the approved ones through which he has said the dialectical syllogism proceeds, and points out the difference between them. True and primary, he says, are things «which have their credibility not through others but from themselves». The things which are immediate are of this sort. For he affirms that the principles which yield knowledge should of themselves have credibility, and one should not be looking for the cause of their being so: if they had other principles and causes, they would no longer be principles in their own right. Definitions are of this kind, for the things assumed in definitional accounts are not obtained through demonstration; and what are called the «natural» and «common» notions (ἀί φυσικαὶ καὶ κοιναὶ ἔννοιαί), to which the axioms belong, are also of this kind”²⁴.

In the above-quoted excerpt we can see a very interesting connection of the Aristotelian and Stoic tradition. In the commentary to the Aristotle’s treatise on logic Alexander uses one of the basic Stoic expressions κοινὰ ἔννοιαί, evidently in the same meaning as he would have used ὁμολογούμενα²⁵. So we have a proof that at least in the 3rd century those terms were considered synonymous. Dirk Obbink argues that κοινή indicated universal agreement in

²³ Aristoteles, *Topica* I 1, 100ab, ed. and transl. H. Tredennick, in: Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, *Topica*, LCL 391, 272-273.

²⁴ Alexander Aphrodisiensis, *In Aristotelis topicorum libros octo commentaria*, ed. M. Wallies, Berlin 1891, 18, transl. J.M. van Ophuijsen, *Alexander of Aphrodisias on Aristotle’s Topics*, New York 2001, 20.

²⁵ D. Obbink (*What All Men Believe – Must Be True: Common Conceptions and Consensio Omnium in Aristotle and Hellenistic Philosophy*, “Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy” 10:1992, 227) thinks that the Stoics assimilate common conceptions with Aristotle’s appeal to ἔνδοξα, but it is important to notice that he thought that ἔνδοξον means “universal agreement”.

the later Hellenistic period, possibly even within the Stoa itself²⁶. These are not the only terms that were used with the same meaning as τὸ ὁμολογούμενον. Already Chrisippus equated πρόληψις, κοινή ἔννοια and φυσικὴ ἔννοια. He regarded both prolepsis and common conception as criteria of truth²⁷.

Anyway, the question is where the commonly agreed statements come from and what is their value in scientific research.

3. The commonly accepted statement (τὸ ὁμολογούμενον) in science. Aristotle believes that the commonly accepted statement (τὸ ὁμολογούμενον) is the premiss for demonstration that gives us absolute and perfect knowledge. We do not really know whether it is innate or has been achieved and if the latter is true – whether it has been achieved intuitively or deliberately.

It is commonly assumed that when the Stoics refer to κοινὰ ἔννοιαι or κοινὰ προλήψεις (that I am sure are synonyms of τὸ ὁμολογούμενον) they mean conceptions that are possessed by all humans²⁸. Chrysippus probably thought of prolepses as merely providing pretheoretical conceptions of the corresponding qualities and nominal definitions of the corresponding terms²⁹. Henry Dyson explains: “The prolepses that are essential for natural functioning and the development of virtue are possessed by all humans; these are the common prolepses (κοινὰ προλήψεις) or common conceptions (κοινὰ ἔννοιαι). The universal possession of the common prolepses is evidenced by certain common tendencies (κοινὰ φοραί) in human behavior and speech. The common conceptions in the specific sense are the articulations of common prolepses that result from philosophical analysis”³⁰.

Of course these are theoretical considerations. In practice, Aristotle used τὸ ὁμολογούμενον as a starting point for his ethics as he stated that everyone agrees that happiness is the highest good and it is only necessary to state what the happiness actually is³¹. He used the argument that there is no ὁμολογούμενον in his teaching to discredit Empedocles³².

It is very interesting to take a look at the frequency of the term τὸ ὁμολογούμενον in the Ancient rhetoric. We can find the argument that something is relevant/true because it is ὁμολογούμενον in the orations of Isocrates and his student Isaeus, Demosthenes, Hermogenes of Tarsus, Dio Chrysostomus, Sopater and even more frequently in Ancient scholia to their orations. There is no doubt that such argument was crucial in philosophical

²⁶ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 224-31.

²⁷ Cf. H. Dyson, *Prolepsis and Epinoia in the Early Stoa*, Berlin – New York 2009, 8.

²⁸ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 48.

²⁹ Cf. F.H. Sandbach, *Ennoia and Prolepsis in the Stoic Theory of Knowledge*, CQ 24 (1930) 46.

³⁰ Cf. Dyson, *Prolepsis and Epinoia in the Early Stoa*, p. 72.

³¹ Cf. Aristoteles, *Ethica Nicomachea* 1097b: “τὴν μὲν εὐδαιμονίαν τὸ ἄριστον λέγειν ὁμολογούμενον τι φαίνεται”, ed. I. Bywater, Oxonii 1890, 10.

³² Cf. *idem*, *Metaphysica* 985a.

demonstrations, but it was as well used with no (conscious) philosophical background just as a strong and convincing argument.

Gregory of Nyssa straightforwardly claims that that sort of deduction should be applied to every doubtful question:

“On every doubtful matter conclusions are reached by starting with acknowledged truths (παντὸς γὰρ πράγματος ἀμφιβαλλομένου διὰ τῶν ὁμολογουμένων αἱ ἀποδείξεις γίνονται)”³³.

It is of no importance whether Eunomius and Gregory took that sort of argumentation directly from Aristotle, indirectly from Chrisippus³⁴, or from well-known orators; it is important that the commonly accepted sentence (τὸ ὁμολογούμενον) was at that time the main strictly scientific premiss of scientific demonstration. The methods used by Eunomius and Gregory of Nyssa show that their dispute was not what we would today call a religious issue, but a truly scientific/philosophical debate conducted in accordance with the commonly accepted (*nomen omen!*) rules.

The goal of my research has been to find out whether the argumentation that something is or is not commonly accepted (τὸ ὁμολογούμενον) often used by both parties of the Eunomian controversy has any deeper than rhetorical and slanderous meaning. I am convinced that that method of proving has its roots in the Aristotle’s theory of absolute knowledge, possible when starting from commonly accepted premisses. The same type of premiss was used by the Stoics, and at least in the 3rd century the expression “commonly accepted statement” (τὸ ὁμολογούμενον) was considered synonymous to one of the main stoic ideas – the idea of “common notions” (κοινὰ ἔννοιαι). The grand personages of Ancient rhetoric widely applied that kind of argumentation not without – I am sure – its philosophical connections. That entire heritage allowed both Eunomius and Gregory to use the “commonly accepted statement” (τὸ ὁμολογούμενον) as a proof of their own rightness.

(Summary)

During the debate between Eunomius and Gregory of Nyssa as a basic and irrefutable argument both parties to the conflict used the statement that the theses they promoted were commonly accepted. Both of them defined the commonly accepted statement with the Greek term τὸ ὁμολογούμενον which in the philo-

³³ Gregorius Nyssenus, *Contra Eunomium* I 431, GNO 1, 152, 14-15, transl. Hall, p. 98.

³⁴ Gregory of Nazianzus (*De moderatione in disputando* (*Oratio* 32), PG 36, 201C) and Basil (*Adversus Eunomium* I 5, PG 29, 516C) invoke syllogisms of both Aristotle and Chrysippus.

sophical tradition derived from Aristotle meant true and reliable premiss that led to absolute knowledge. In such a meaning that term – interchangeably with the expression κοινὰ ἔννοιαι – was used not only in philosophy but also in rhetoric. The methods used by Eunomius and Gregory of Nyssa show that their dispute was not what we would today call a religious issue, but a truly scientific/philosophical debate conducted in accordance with the commonly accepted (*nomen omen!*) rules.

TWIERDZENIE POWSZECHNIE PRZYJĘTE (TO OMOΛOΓOYMENON)
JAKO PUNKT WYJŚCIA DYSKUŚJI TEOLOGICZNEJ
– EUNOMIUSZ I GRZEGORZ Z NYSSY

(Streszczenie)

W debacie Eunomiusza z Grzegorzem z Nyssy obie strony konfliktu używały jako podstawowego i nieodpartego argumentu stwierdzenia, że głoszone przez nich tezy są powszechnie przyjęte. Obaj stosowali na określenie twierdzenia powszechnie przyjętego termin τὸ ὁμολογούμενον, który w tradycji filozoficznej wywodzącej się od Arystotelesa oznaczał prawdziwą i pewną przesłankę prowadzącą do wiedzy absolutnej. W takim znaczeniu termin ten był szeroko stosowany nie tylko w filozofii – zamiennie z wyrażeniem κοινὰ ἔννοιαι – ale także w retoryce. Ta właśnie argumentacja używana zarówno przez Eunomiusza, jak i przez Grzegorza z Nyssy, dowodzi, że ich dyskusja nie była czymś, co dzisiaj nazwalibyśmy kwestią religijną, ale prawdziwą naukową/filozoficzną debatą, prowadzoną zgodnie z powszechnie przyjętymi (*nomen omen!*) zasadami.

Key words: Gregory of Nyssa, Eunomius, Aristotle, Chrysippus, syllogism, demonstration, commonly accepted statement, common notions.

Słowa kluczowe: Grzegorz z Nyssy, Eunomiusz, Arystoteles, Chryzyp, syllogizm, dowodzenie, twierdzenie powszechnie przyjęte, wspólne pojęcia.

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