

## **Aristotle on Knowledge and the Knowable**

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### **I. Introduction: Knowledge and the Knowable**

The aim of this paper is to illuminate Aristotle’s theory of knowledge by examining his characterization of what can be known.

One might object to the project before it gets started, however, for it is not obvious that Aristotle has a theory of knowledge to illuminate.

Certainly he devotes a lot of attention to something he calls *epistêmê*. But as is very widely recognized, despite the etymological connection with our ‘epistemology’ Aristotle’s *epistêmê* is far more specific, and far more demanding, than knowledge as nowadays conceived: one only has *epistêmê* of a fact if one can demonstrate it from necessary premises, or if it is a necessary and indemonstrable premise of demonstration.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, rather than giving *epistêmê* the unique status that modern epistemology gives

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<sup>1</sup> (In the case of “non-demonstrative *epistêmê*.”) For arguments that *epistêmê* is very different from ordinary knowledge see among others M.F. Burnyeat, “Aristotle on Understanding Knowledge” [“Understanding”], in E. Berti ed. *Aristotle on Science: The Posterior Analytics, Proceedings of the Eighth Symposium Aristotelicum* (Antenore, 1981), 97-139, and J. Barnes, *Aristotle: Posterior Analytics*, translated with a commentary, 2nd edition [*Posterior Analytics*] (Oxford, 1993). Pasnau makes an interesting case that in discussing *epistêmê* Aristotle is doing “*ideal epistemology*” (R. Pasnau, *After Certainty: a history of our epistemic ideals and illusions* [*After Certainty*], (Oxford, 2017)); cf. C.C.W.

to knowledge, Aristotle treats it as only one among a number of important cognitive conditions, including *technê* (craft-knowledge), *phronêsis* (practical wisdom), *nous* (intellectual intuition), and *sophia* (philosophical wisdom). Each of these is knowledge-like in being always and non-accidentally true, but each is both more specific and more demanding than knowledge as now conceived.

One might then conclude that Aristotle has no theory of knowledge. He lacks a general concept with any good claim to be the counterpart of our modern notion of knowledge, but instead works with various concepts of various kinds of specialized knowledge with no focus on what they have in common.<sup>2</sup> This seems to be the majority view in contemporary scholarship: in companions and handbooks to Aristotle, chapters on epistemology are usually absent altogether.<sup>3</sup>

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Taylor, "Aristotle's Epistemology," in S. Everson ed. *Epistemology: Companions to Ancient Thought*, (Cambridge, 1990), 116-142, at 122.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Pasnau, *After Certainty*: "From Aristotle through the Middle Ages and well beyond, philosophers took an interest in carefully circumscribing one or another particular kind of cognitive grasp of reality—perception, imagination, assent, deduction, and so on—but showed little interest in defining the broad category of knowledge". On the question of whether Plato is an exception, see J. Moss, "Is Plato's Epistemology About Knowledge?" in S. Hetherington and N.D. Smith eds., *What the Ancients Offer to Contemporary Epistemology* (Abingdon and New York, 2020), 68-85, and G. Fine, "Epistêmê and Doxa, Knowledge and Belief, in the *Phaedo*," in *Essays in Ancient Epistemology*, (Oxford, 2021), 109-133.

<sup>3</sup> For example the *Cambridge Companion to Aristotle* (J. Barnes ed., Cambridge, 1995) has a chapter on philosophy of science but none on epistemology, as does Ackrill's introductory work (J.L. Ackrill, *Aristotle the Philosopher* (Oxford, 1981)); there is no chapter on knowledge or epistemology in overviews like J. Lear, *Aristotle, the Desire to Understand* (Cambridge, 1988), or C. Shields, *Aristotle* (Abingdon and New York, 2007). When scholars do write about "Aristotle's epistemology," they turn

Aristotle does however have a term that translators often render as ‘knowledge’: ‘*gnôsis*’. He uses this, along with its cognate verbs *gignôskein* and *gnôrizen*, to cover *epistêmê* as well as *technê*, *phronêsis*, *nous* and *sophia*.<sup>4</sup> He also applies the term to experience (*empeiria*), and to perception.<sup>5</sup> What does he have in mind? Many translations assume, and a few recent works explicitly argue, that Aristotle’s *gnôsis* is what we call knowledge (for arguments see Salmieri,<sup>6</sup> Bronstein,<sup>7</sup> McPartland,<sup>8</sup> and Gasser-Wingate;<sup>9</sup> on *gnôsis* as knowledge in the *Posterior Analytics* in particular see Burnyeat<sup>10</sup>).<sup>11</sup>

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out to be discussing his theory of *epistêmê*, without meaning to imply that *epistêmê* is properly understood as knowledge in the modern sense.

<sup>4</sup> For example *Met.* 981a15-16, *EN* 1141b14-15, *APo.* 99b17–26.

<sup>5</sup> *Met.* 981a15-16, *de An.* 427a17-21, *GA* 731a30-b5.

<sup>6</sup> G. Salmieri, “Aristotelian *epistêmê* and the relation between knowledge and understanding,” [“*Epistêmê*”], *Metascience* (2014), 23:1-29.

<sup>7</sup> D. Bronstein, *Aristotle on Knowledge and Learning: the Posterior Analytics [Knowledge and Learning]* (Oxford, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> K. McPartland (2019), “Aristotle: From Perception to Understanding,” [“Aristotle”], in N.D. Smith ed., *Knowledge in Ancient Philosophy*, (London, 2019) 145-167.

<sup>9</sup> M. Gasser-Wingate, *Aristotle’s Empiricism [Empiricism]* (Oxford, 2021).

<sup>10</sup> M.F. Burnyeat, “Understanding,” and also “*Epistêmê*,” in B. Morison and K. Ierodiakonou eds., *Epistêmê, Etc.: Essays in Honor of Jonathan Barnes*, (Oxford, 2011), 3-29.

<sup>11</sup> For a dissenting view see G. Fine, “Aristotle on Knowledge,” in *Essays in Ancient Epistemology* (Oxford, 2021), 221-242: she argues that *gnôsis* cannot be knowledge because (i) it can be false, and (ii) it includes non-propositional states. I address both claims below.

If this claim is right – if Aristotle indeed has a general notion of knowledge which covers *epistêmê* and perception and all the rest – it is very important. We should try to develop a detailed account of Aristotelian *gnôsis*, both for the sake of understanding the general category on its own terms and for the sake of illuminating its various kinds, from perception up through *nous*.

But the task is a difficult one. Aristotle has no treatise on *gnôsis*, nor does he ever offer any definition of it, nor even any sustained discussion. For the most part we have to piece together an account by looking at his discussions of each of the kinds – a mammoth project.

There is however another source of information about Aristotle’s conception of *gnôsis*. Throughout the corpus we find numerous – albeit scattered and unsystematic – mentions and discussions of something he calls the *gnôrimon*, often translated ‘knowable,’ ‘familiar,’ or ‘intelligible’. Etymologically (see next section), the *gnôrimon* is that which yields *gnôsis*. And Aristotle’s use is in line with the etymology. He uses the word to characterize the objects of *gnôsis* in general, and also the objects of various specific kinds: he applies the term to the particular facts and properties that are objects of perception, the principles of demonstration that are objects of *nous*, the conclusions of demonstration that are objects of *epistêmê*, the ethical facts that are the objects of *phronêsis*, and so on (see citations throughout). Therefore if we could get a clear account of the *gnôrimon*, we would stand to learn a good deal about *gnôsis*.

I will argue that despite apparent disparities and complications, Aristotle’s discussions across the corpus suggest a unified account of the *gnôrimon* as what affords knowledge – thus lending strong support to the view that *gnôsis* is knowledge. More specifically I will argue, again despite apparent disparities and complications, that Aristotle’s characterizations of the *gnôrimon* across the corpus suggest a unified account of *gnôsis*. To have *gnôsis* is to know something in broadly the way that we know a familiar

person, place, or mathematical proof: to be more or less *well-acquainted* with it.<sup>12</sup> *Gnôsis* is knowledge in the sense of good acquaintance.

An important caveat: ‘Good acquaintance’ is the best term I can find for the phenomenon I have in mind (other languages have dedicated terms, like the French *connaissance*), but it comes with some unwanted connotations which I should dispel before proceeding. First, I do not mean to evoke the Russellian notion of acquaintance as direct awareness. Some Aristotelian *gnôsis* involves Russellian acquaintance – certainly proper perception, and intellectual intuition (*noêsis*) of essences – but much of it is mediated: we can be well-acquainted with things through inference or testimony or induction, for example. Second, in the same vein, in saying that *gnôsis* is good acquaintance with something I do not mean to deny that it can be propositional. Modern epistemologists often contrast objectual knowledge (such as knowing a person or place) with propositional or factual knowledge. But while some Aristotelian *gnôsis* is indeed non-

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<sup>12</sup> In construing *gnôsis* in this way I am in general agreement with Salmieri, “*Epistêmê*”. For a contrasting view of *gnôsis* as knowledge see McPartland: we have *gnôsis* when we “truly represent the world as a result of exercising capacities that have accurate representation of the world as their constitutive natural end” (McPartland, “Aristotle”, 148). Bronstein’s (*Knowledge and Learning*) and Gasser-Wingate’s (*Empiricism*) accounts are more neutral (“true cognition,” “factive cognition”). I take their views, and perhaps even McPartland’s, to be broadly congenial to mine but without the emphasis on good acquaintance. Taylor (“Aristotle’s Epistemology”) and Fine (“Aristotle on Knowledge”) also argue that Aristotle has a general notion of knowledge, but their projects are quite different from mine: they restrict their studies to intellectual, propositional conditions, and (partly for that reason) do not think that ‘*gnôsis*’ is Aristotle’s term for knowledge, since it applies to perception as well as higher kinds. Taylor thinks that Aristotle works with a general unnamed conception of knowledge as “non-accidental grasp of truth” (117); Fine thinks that *epistêmê* is knowledge, for it is “a truth-entailing cognitive condition that implies belief, but that goes beyond true belief” (228).

propositional (again proper perception and *noêsis* of essences, which are both “simple,” non-predicative),<sup>13</sup> most *gnôsis* is very clearly propositional: *epistêmê* of the conclusion of a demonstration, *empeiria* that this treatment cured Callias when he was ill of this disease, and so on. My claim is that *gnôsis* is primarily a matter of being well-acquainted with something, knowing it well, whether we do this by taking on the object’s form (as with *noêsis* of essences and with simple perception), or instead by making propositional judgments about it. (I discuss propositional *gnôsis* at length below.) Third, again in the same vein, neither do I mean to endorse the once-fashionable view that all Greek knowledge was construed on the model of observation, or that *gnôsis*’ cognate verb *gignôskô* simply *means* knowledge by observation.<sup>14</sup> It is not that all knowing is like seeing; instead, knowing is becoming well-acquainted with something, where seeing is one way of doing this. Finally, I say ‘good acquaintance’ to avoid the unwanted connotations of unqualified ‘acquaintance’ (the Russellian connotations on one hand, and the idiomatic contrast with real knowledge on the other, as in “I’m acquainted with her, but I really don’t know her”). But the ‘good’ may be misleading, for I do not mean that *gnôsis* is the good part of a larger phenomenon called acquaintance, acquaintance above a certain threshold: *gnôsis* is instead a *sui generis* kind. Nor am I saying that all *gnôsis* is equally good *qua* good acquaintance. One can know a person, place, or other object more or less well – more or less deeply or thoroughly. Thus I am committed to saying that one can be only *somewhat* or *slightly* well-acquainted with something, odd though this may sound.

I will give further positive characterizations of good acquaintance below, but for now, with these caveats in mind, we can take the knowledge one has of a familiar person as a paradigm. My project in the paper

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<sup>13</sup> See especially *De Anima* 430b26-30.

<sup>14</sup> See e.g. B. Snell, *Die Ausdrücke für den Begriff des Wissens in der vorplatonischen Philosophie*, (Berlin, 1924) and J. Moravcsik, “Understanding and Knowledge in Plato’s Philosophy”, *Neue Hefte für Philosophie* 15/16 (1979): 53-69. For an extensive critique of this view see Burnyeat, “*Epistêmê*”.

is to show that that Aristotle's treatment of the *gnôrimon* strongly suggests that *gnôsis* is good acquaintance. The varieties of *gnôsis* – *epistêmê*, *phronêsis*, perception, and the rest – are all conditions in which we become well-acquainted, to a greater or lesser degree, with some portion of reality. Moreover, on Aristotle's view this is the *only* kind of knowledge. When he calls propositions *gnôrimon*, or says that we have *gnôsis* that something is the case, the kind of knowledge at issue is not something specifically propositional by contrast with objectual – *savoir* by contrast with *connaître*, or Russell's knowledge of truths by contrast with knowledge of things – but instead the one kind of knowledge he recognizes: good acquaintance with reality.

Perhaps the clearest way to put my claim is in terms of the value of knowledge. When Aristotle says that all humans by nature desire to know,<sup>15</sup> or when he identifies as the virtues of the best parts of our soul various conditions by which we have *gnôsis*,<sup>16</sup> what he means is that we thrive when we become well-acquainted with reality. We aim to be knowers not primarily because we want our beliefs to be certain or justified or reliably produced or the like, but instead because we want to be well-acquainted with the world: for reality to be well-known to us, like a well-known person.

## II. *Gnôsis*, the *gnôrimon*, and good acquaintance

The adjective *gnôrimon* is cognate with the noun *gnôsis* and its related verbs *gignôskein* and *gnôrizein*. Aristotle certainly intends to emphasize this linguistic connection. To take just a few examples out of many: he says both that we must *gnôrizein* the principles and that these things are most *gnôrimon* (*Phys.*

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<sup>15</sup> *Met.* 980a21. The word is *eidēnai*, not linguistically connected to *gnôsis*, but the ensuing discussion clearly correlates the two.

<sup>16</sup> *Phronêsis* and *sophia*. For *phronêsis* as *gnôsis* see among many others *EN* 1141b14-15; *sophia* is a combination of *nous* and *epistêmê* (*EN* 1141a18-b3), which are called *gnôsis* at many points, e.g. *APo.* 99b17–26.

184a10-26); he says that the goal of learning is to *gnônai* what is most *gnôrimon* (*Met.* 1029b3-20); and he uses *gnôrimon* interchangeably with *gignôskomenon* and *gnôston*, other adjectives formed directly from these verbs (*Met.* 992b30-33 and 1029b8-12).<sup>17</sup>

What is the exact relation? Although the *-imon* suffix is hard to systematize,<sup>18</sup> in many cases it signifies fitness or tendency to be the passive object of the cognate verb: for example *potimos*, drinkable; *dokimos*, estimable or esteemed. Certainly the passive-object account fits the standard uses of *gnôrimon* in Aristotle and beyond (see examples below): dictionaries give ‘known,’ ‘well-known,’ or ‘knowable,’ along with synonyms. To be *gnôrimon* is to be, or be fit to be, or tending to be, the object of *gnôsis*; the *gnôrimon* is what affords *gnôsis*. Given this tight connection, an understanding of the *gnôrimon* should show us a lot about *gnôsis*.

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<sup>17</sup> “All learning is through things known before (*progignôskomenôn*)...even that which comes through definitions, for the things from which the definition is [i.e. its parts] one must know before (*proeidenai*) and they must be *gnôrima*” (*Met.* 992b30-33). “Things that are *gnôrima* to each person at first will often be only slightly *gnôrima*.... Nevertheless, starting from things that are poorly *gnôsta* but *gnôsta* to oneself, one must try as I have said to advance by means of these to know (*gnônai*) what is entirely *gnôsta*” (*Met.* 1029b8-12).

<sup>18</sup> H. Smyth, *Greek Grammar* (Harvard, 1956), gives “often denoting *able to* or *fit to*” (858.9); R. Kühner and F. Blass *Ausführliche Grammatik der Griechischen Sprache, Erster Teil: Elementar und Formenlehre*, 2 vols, 3rd edition, (Hannover 1892), give “bezeichnen in der Regel eine Möglichkeit oder Fähigkeit intransitiver und passiver Bedeutung, zuweilen auch... eine Notwendigkeit, seltener das Ergebnis der Möglichkeit” (332.5); but contrast for example *phronimos*, tending to think wisely (*phronein*), or *ôphelimos*, tending to benefit (*ôphelein*) – active rather than passive. (Cf. *gonimos*, *machimos*, and many others.)



We can begin with the idiomatic use of the word. ‘*Gnôrimon*’ is not one of Aristotle’s neologisms: it has an established and widespread use in the Greek of his time. Nor is there any mystery about its standard sense: to be *gnôrimon* is usually to be well-known in the way of things with which we are familiar through direct interaction, or about which we are well-informed. In ordinary Greek the word appears most frequently in reference to well-known persons: a *gnôrimos* is either a personal acquaintance or someone noteworthy. Aristotle frequently uses the word this way, for example contrasting *gnôrimoi* with people one does not know (*agnôtes*, *EN* 1126b25, *Pol.* 1327b40). Again following ordinary Greek, he also uses the word to characterize other things with which we are familiar, such as familiar pleasures (*EN* 1153b35), familiar words (*Topics* 149a21), or familiar methods of reasoning (*APr.* 68b35-7, *Topics* 105a16-19) – things to which we are accustomed through frequent exposure. On a few occasions he even states explicitly that things are *gnôrimon* in virtue of our being accustomed to them:

Αἱ δ’ ἀκροάσεις κατὰ τὰ ἔθη συμβαίνουσιν· ὡς γὰρ  
εἰώθαμεν οὕτως ἀξιοῦμεν λέγεσθαι, καὶ τὰ παρὰ ταῦτα οὐχ  
ὄμοια φαίνεται ἀλλὰ διὰ τὴν ἀσυνήθειαν ἀγνωστότερα καὶ  
ξενικώτερα· τὸ γὰρ σὺνήθεσ γνώριμον.

The effects of a lecture depend on the customs/habits (*ethê*) of the audience. For we esteem things that are spoken the way to which we are accustomed (*eiôthamen*), and things that go against this do not appear similar [viz., worthy], but on account of being unaccustomed (*asunêtheia*) [appear] very unknown and alien (*agnôstotera kai xenikôetera*). For *the customary is gnôrimon (to gar sunêthes gnôrimon)*.<sup>19</sup> (*Met.* 994b32-995a3, emphasis mine)

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<sup>19</sup> Some manuscripts have *gnôrimôteron* in the last line; the effect is the same.

ἴσως οὖν ἡμῖν γε ἀρκτέον ἀπὸ τῶν ἡμῖν γνωρίμων. διὸ δεῖ τοῖς ἔθεσιν ἦχθαι καλῶς τὸν περὶ καλῶν καὶ δικαίων καὶ ὅλων τῶν πολιτικῶν ἀκουσόμενον ἱκανῶς.

We must begin from things *gnôrima* to us. Which is why those who are going to study the fine and just and in general politics need to have been raised in fine customs/habits (*ethesin*). (EN 1095b3-5)

ἀλλ' εἰλήφασι τὴν τοῦ ὀνόματος κληρονομίαν αἱ σωματικαὶ ἡδοναὶ διὰ τὸ πλειστάκις τε παραβάλλειν εἰς αὐτάς καὶ πάντας μετέχειν αὐτῶν· διὰ τὸ μόνας οὖν γνωρίμους εἶναι ταύτας μόνας οἴονται εἶναι.

The bodily pleasures have usurped the name [of pleasure] on account of us often encountering them and all people partaking of them:<sup>20</sup> because these alone are *gnôrimoi*, people think that these alone exist/are [pleasures]. (EN 1153b33-54a1)

Thus Aristotle often conforms to popular usage in using *gnôrimon* to label that with which we are familiar or accustomed; being familiar with something, meanwhile, is a paradigm way of being well-acquainted with it. Of course this does not yet show that Aristotle's every use of *gnôrimon* could be translated as "object of good acquaintance," nor therefore that *gnôsis* is good acquaintance: perhaps when he applies 'gnôrimon' to the objects of *epistêmê* or *phronêsis* or the like, he intends some technical meaning. Nonetheless, it is certainly striking that he chooses a word with such strong idiomatic connotations, instead of choosing a less common word or coining his own (perhaps *eidêton*, from *eidenai*, a verb he tends to use interchangeably with *gignôskein*). This makes it reasonable to hypothesize, in advance of a

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<sup>20</sup> διὰ τὸ πλειστάκις τε παραβάλλειν εἰς αὐτάς καὶ πάντας μετέχειν αὐτῶν.

careful look at the evidence, that Aristotle intends something like the colloquial sense of *gnôrimon* throughout, even when connecting the *gnôrimon* with the loftiest kinds of knowledge.

An intriguing passage from the *Protrepticus* offers striking evidence in favor of that hypothesis, by drawing an analogy between philosophical wisdom and our knowledge of *gnôrimoi* people:

Καὶ τὸ φεύγειν δὲ τὸν θάνατον τοὺς πολλοὺς δείκνυσι τὴν  
φιλομάθειαν τῆς ψυχῆς. φεύγει γὰρ ἃ μὴ γινώσκει, τὸ σκοτῶδες καὶ  
τὸ μὴ δῆλον, φύσει δὲ διώκει τὸ φανερὸν καὶ τὸ γνωστὸν. ...  
διὰ τὸ αὐτὸ δὲ τοῦτο καὶ χαίρομεν τοῖς συνήθεσι καὶ πράγμασι  
καὶ ἀνθρώποις, καὶ φίλους τούτους καλοῦμεν τοὺς γνωρίμους. δηλοῖ οὖν  
ταῦτα σαφῶς ὅτι τὸ γνωστὸν καὶ  $\leq$ τὸ $\geq$  φανερὸν καὶ τὸ δῆλον ἀγαπητόν  
ἐστίν· εἰ δὲ τὸ γνωστὸν καὶ τὸ σαφές, δῆλον ὅτι καὶ τὸ γινώσκειν ἀναγκαῖον καὶ  
τὸ φρονεῖν ὁμοίως.

The fact that most people avoid death also displays the soul's love of learning (*philomatheian*); for it flees the things it does not know (*gignôskei*),<sup>21</sup> what is obscure and not clear, and by nature it pursues what is evident and known (*gnôston*)... It is for this same reason that we also enjoy what we are accustomed to (*tois sunêthesi*), both things and people, and call those people who are *gnôrimoi* 'friends'. These things, then, show clearly that what is known (*gnôston*) and evident and clear is loved (*agapêton*); and if what is known and clear [is loved], then it's clear that necessarily

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<sup>21</sup> I follow standard translations of '*gignôskein*' and '*gnôston*' as 'know' and 'known'; the other standard translations, 'recognize' and 'recognized', would arguably lend even stronger support to my account.

also knowing (*to gignôskein*) and being wise (*to phronein*) are likewise.

(*Protrepticus* B102)<sup>23</sup>

Aristotle is here echoing a memorable passage from Plato's *Republic* (376a-c), which argues that dogs display their philosophical (wisdom-loving) nature by barking at strangers and fawning over familiar people (*gnôrimoi*). In both passages, '*gnôrimoi*' (the masculine plural) clearly denotes familiar people. Aristotle is taking our love of what is *gnôrimon* in this way as a sign of our love of knowledge: of learning (*mathein*), knowing (*gignôskein*), and even being wise (*phronein*).<sup>24</sup> He seems to be arguing as follows:

1) We love known things *because* they are known, i.e. because we know them.<sup>25</sup>

2) This shows that we love knowledge, including philosophical wisdom.

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<sup>23</sup> I. Düring, *Aristotle's Protrepticus*, (Stockholm, 1961),

<sup>24</sup> The *Protrepticus* mostly equates *phronein* with *theôrein*, not drawing the later works' distinction between practical and theoretical wisdom. *Gignôskein* may here function as a synonym for *phronein*, or may mean knowing in general.

<sup>25</sup> If we hate unknown things and love well-known things, plausibly we hate the former *because* they are unknown and love the latter *because* they are known. Plato makes the inference more explicit: a dog barks at strangers even when they have done him no harm, and fawns on familiar people (*gnôrimoi*) even when they have done him no good, which shows that dogs "distinguish a friendly from a hostile sight by nothing other than having learned (*katamathein*) the one and being ignorant of the other. And indeed how could something not be a lover of learning (*philomathes*) who demarcates what is akin from what is alien by understanding (*sunesis*) and ignorance? (ὄψιν οὐδενὶ ἄλλω φίλην καὶ ἐχθρὰν διακρίνει ἢ τῷ τὴν μὲν καταμαθεῖν, τὴν δὲ ἀγνοῆσαι. καίτοι πῶς οὐκ ἂν φιλομαθὲς εἶη συνέσει τε καὶ ἀγνοίᾳ ὀριζόμενον τό τε οἰκεῖον καὶ τὸ ἀλλότριον)" (*Rep.* 376b4-7).

Clearly the knowing at issue in (1) is a matter of being well-acquainted with an object, where the paradigm is good acquaintance with a friend. So unless Aristotle is equivocating, the knowing at issue in (2) should be the same: good acquaintance. The implication is that knowledge of all kinds, including philosophical wisdom, *is* good acquaintance. In loving wisdom, just as in loving familiar people, we are loving being well-acquainted with the world.<sup>26</sup>

The *Protrepticus* is an early work whose epistemology Aristotle clearly modified in some ways later on; it would be rash to infer from this one passage that Aristotle always uses ‘*gnôrimon*’ to mean object of good acquaintance, and therefore that he conceives of all *gnôsis* as good acquaintance. Moreover, there are two apparent obstacles to this inference: two considerations which could be taken to show that Aristotle sometimes uses *gnôrimon* and *gnôsis* in quite different ways.

First, he distinguishes between what is *gnôrimon* “to us” and what is *gnôrimon* “by nature,” and while the former is easily interpreted as the familiar, the latter seems to mean something quite different – perhaps, as translations often propose, the intelligible.

Second, while he often applies ‘*gnôrimon*’ to objects like people, pleasure, substances and the like, he also frequently applies it to a very different kind of thing: propositions or accounts (*protaseis*, *logoi*, *legomena*, definitions, etc.). One might think that even if in the former case the *gnôrimon* is connected with good acquaintance, in the latter case it must indicate what is known through a different kind of

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<sup>26</sup> More precisely, drawing on a distinction I will explain shortly, which is not explicit in this passage but easily applied to it: familiar people are “*gnôrimon* to us” – well-known in the sense of easily accessible, familiar; this love of what is *gnôrimon* “to us” is a sign of our love of what is *gnôrimon* “without qualification” – what is thoroughly and deeply knowable, viz., the objects of wisdom.

knowledge: propositional knowledge – something along the lines of justified, certain, non-accidentally true belief.

In the next sections I will discuss these apparent obstacles in turn and argue that they turn out in fact to fit quite well with an account of the *gnôrimon* as what affords good acquaintance.

First, although the difference between what is *gnôrimon* to us and by nature is real, it entails no ambiguity in ‘*gnôrimon*’. For while familiar things are paradigm objects of good acquaintance, they are not the only kinds of things with which we are well-acquainted, and ‘*gnôrimon*’ certainly does not *mean* ‘familiar’.

We are well-acquainted with familiar things, things *gnôrimon* to us, in that we can easily recognize them, or identify them, or manipulate them cognitively in important ways. But, given the right education, we can also be well-acquainted – indeed, far better acquainted – with the things *gnôrimon* by nature, in that we know them thoroughly and deeply, have deep insight into them, deep understanding of them.

As to the disparity between *gnôrimon* objects and accounts, this turns out to be merely apparent.

Aristotle, I will argue, does not share our modern view that there is a clear distinction between propositional and objectual knowledge. Instead he thinks that propositions (or perhaps more precisely the facts they express) are known in just the same way as objects: by being the objects of good acquaintance, either to us or by nature.

I address these two apparent obstacles in turn (sections III through VII); I close with further evidence that the *gnôrimon* is the object of good acquaintance, drawn from Aristotle’s association of the *gnôrimon* with the clear.

### **III. *Gnôrimon* to us vs. *gnôrimon* by nature**

An obvious complication in Aristotle's account of the *gnôrimon* stems from his famous distinction between what is *gnôrimon* "to us" (*hêmin*) or "relative to us" (*pros hêmas*) on the one hand, and what is *gnôrimon* "by nature" (*phusei*) or "without qualification (*haplôs*)" on the other. For example:

πέφυκε δὲ ἐκ τῶν γνωριμωτέρων ἡμῖν ἢ ὁδὸς καὶ σαφεστέρων ἐπὶ τὰ σαφέστερα  
τῆ φύσει καὶ γνωριμώτερα· οὐ γὰρ ταῦτ' ἡμῖν τε γνώριμα καὶ ἀπλῶς, διόπερ  
ἀνάγκη τὸν τρόπον τοῦτον προάγειν ἐκ τῶν ἀσαφεστέρων μὲν  
τῆ φύσει ἡμῖν δὲ σαφεστέρων ἐπὶ τὰ σαφέστερα τῆ φύσει καὶ γνωριμώτερα.

It is in the nature of the road [toward principles and causes] to be from what is more *gnôrimon* and clearer to us to what is clearer and more *gnôrimon* by nature; for the same things are not *gnôrimon* both to us and without qualification. For which reason it is necessary to progress in this way from what is less clear by nature, but clearer to us, to what is clearer and more *gnôrimon* by nature. *Phys.* 184a16–21)

πρότερα δ' ἐστὶ καὶ γνωριμώτερα διχῶς· οὐ γὰρ ταῦτ' ἄλλ' ἄλλοτερον τῆ φύσει καὶ πρὸς  
ἡμᾶς πρότερον, οὐδὲ γνωριμώτερον καὶ ἡμῖν γνωριμώτερον. λέγω δὲ πρὸς ἡμᾶς μὲν  
πρότερα καὶ γνωριμώτερα τὰ ἐγγύτερον τῆς αἰσθήσεως, ἀπλῶς δὲ πρότερα καὶ  
γνωριμώτερα τὰ πορρωτέρω. ἔστι δὲ πορρωτάτω μὲν τὰ καθόλου μάλιστα,  
ἐγγυτάτω δὲ τὰ καθ' ἕκαστα

It is necessary that demonstrative *epistêmê* be from [principles that are] true and primary and immediate and more *gnôrimon* and prior to and causes of the conclusion... But things are prior and more *gnôrimon* in two ways: for prior by nature and relative to us are not the same, and neither are more *gnôrimon* [by nature] and more *gnôrimon* to us. By prior and more *gnôrimon* relative to us I mean things that are closer to perception; by prior and more *gnôrimon* without qualification I mean

things that are further away [from perception]. And the universal is most of all furthest away, while particulars are closest. (*APo.* 71b20–72a5)

Some scholars have thought that this distinction turns on different senses of the word ‘*gnôrimon*.’ In ‘*gnôrimon* to us’ the word means ‘familiar,’ but in ‘*gnôrimon* by nature’ (or ‘without qualification’) it means something different. Here is Ross on the distinction in the *Posterior Analytics*:

[I]n saying that the premises [of demonstration] are more known by nature he is saying that the universal fact is more *intelligible* than the individual fact that is deduced from it... Thus *the two senses of ‘more known’* [*gnôrimoteron*] are ‘*more familiar*,’ which is applicable to the conclusion, and ‘*more intelligible*,’ which is applicable to the premisses. In demonstration we are...explaining a familiar fact by deducing it from less familiar but more intelligible facts.<sup>29</sup>

If Ross is right then ‘*gnôrimon*’ is ambiguous between the colloquial sense, ‘familiar,’ and a quite different sense – ‘intelligible’. Others defend or assume similar views, sometimes giving explicit argument for ambiguity,<sup>30</sup> sometimes simply translating the word differently in contexts corresponding to

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<sup>29</sup> W.D. Ross, *Aristotle’s Prior and Posterior Analytics: A revised text with introduction and commentary*, (Oxford, 1949), at 54, emphases mine.

<sup>30</sup> Angioni argues that what is more *gnôrimon* by nature is what causes other things to be known, strongly implying (without explicitly claiming) that this is the *meaning* of the term, and adds: “On the other hand, the qualification added by the phrase ‘to us’ takes the word ‘*gnôrimon*’ in a sense very common in Greek ordinary usage: ‘familiar’, that which we are generally acquainted with” (L. Angioni, “Explanation and Definition in *Physics* I.1” [“Explanation”], *Apeiron* 34 (2001): 307-320 at 310). Compare McKirahan’s comment on *APo.* 71b33-72a5: “although ‘better known’ is the best translation of *gnôrimôteron* and it



the two phrases.<sup>31</sup> (Arguably the ambiguity goes even further, for the objects of perception may be *gnôrimon* to us without being familiar through repeated exposure; I return to this complication in discussing perception in the next section.)

We can see why the ambiguity interpretation is attractive. The person who has reached the goal of education and come to know the things *gnôrimon* by nature – that is, the person with *sophia* of principles – is not, or at least not merely, *familiar* with these things: the cognitive relation she bears to them is deep insight or understanding, something different from familiarity not just in degree but in kind. One can be familiar with something without at all understanding it; one can also encounter something unfamiliar and gain deep insight into it right away.<sup>32</sup>

Despite this appearance of ambiguity, Aristotle’s use of the “to us/by nature” distinction strongly implies that he in fact means to be using ‘*gnôrimon*’ univocally: he means to pick out one single property, which can be had either relatively or without qualification. Several scholars have seen this, arguing that ‘*gnôrimon*’ means the same thing on both sides of the distinction: something like “such as to be

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seems important to keep a single English word for both ways of being *gnôrimôteron*, the difference between the two points to ‘more intelligible’ as a translation of the word when we have *gnôrimôteron* ‘in nature’ and ‘better known’ when we have *gnôrimôteron* ‘to us’” (R. McKirahan, *Principles and Proofs: Aristotle’s Theory of Demonstrative Science [Principles]*, (Princeton, 1992), at 30).

<sup>31</sup> For a striking example, see Forster’s translation of *Topics* 149a20-28: “there is no reason why the differentia rather than the genus should be described by the most familiar (γνωριμωτάτω) term... But ... the differentia is less intelligible (γνώριμω) than the genus”. (Elsewhere he gives ‘comprehensible’ for things *gnôrimon* by nature.)

<sup>32</sup> It is thus misleading, or at best metaphorical, to translate ‘*gnôrimon phusei*’ as ‘familiar by nature’ (as for example Barnes, *Posterior Analytics*, on occasion; cf. Burnyeat, “Understanding,” 127-8).

known.”<sup>33</sup> What is *gnôrimon* to us is such as to be known to us in our actual condition; what is *gnôrimon* by nature is such as to be known by someone in an excellent intellectual condition.

I think this view is right, and I want here to give it a careful defense, with the aim of showing that it is best fleshed out by taking the kind of knowledge at issue as the same one invoked by the colloquial use of ‘*gnôrimon*’: good acquaintance.

For help in understanding the to us/by nature distinction we can turn to the ethical works, where Aristotle develops it in regard to several value properties. For instance:

Some things are pleasant or good without qualification; others are pleasant or good to a particular person, but not without qualification, but on the contrary base and not

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<sup>33</sup> Gauthier gives “ce qui est objet de connaissance, soit en acte...soit en puissance” (R.A. Gauthier, *L’Ethique a Nicomaque*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Louvain-paris, 1970), vol. 2, 18). Irwin argues that the *gnôrimon* by nature is “‘naturally such as to be known’ or ‘has a nature to be known’, whether or not someone actually knows it” (T. Irwin, *Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics* (Indianapolis, 1981), comment ad 1095b2-4; Burnyeat says what is *gnôrimon* by nature “is of a nature to be known...it has, as it were, a tendency to be known and it will actually be known *if* you attend to it or think about it in the appropriate way. ... [it] is not *gnôrimon* to all men, but to those whose thought is properly disposed ... as a result of training” (Burnyeat, “Understanding,” 129, note 53). I think all these get it right. (S. Mansion, “‘Plus connu en soi,’ ‘plus connu pour nous.’ Une distinction épistémologique importante chez Aristote” [“Plus connu”,] *Pensamiento* 35 (1979): 161-170, gives an article-length treatment of the distinction, arguing for a view somewhat orthogonal to the one I will defend here: on her view, Aristotle is interested in the difference between how things appear to us at the starting-point of inquiry by contrast with how they appear after we have successfully inquired.)

pleasant:<sup>34</sup> whatever things are beneficial to the wicked or pleasant to children as such. And likewise the fearful: some things are fearful without qualification, others to a particular person. (*EE* 1228b17-23; cf. *EN* 1099a11-15 and 1148b15-18, among others)

It does not at all seem that there are two different *senses* of ‘fearful’ at work here, nor of ‘pleasant’ or ‘good’. Aristotle’s intention is quite different, as becomes clear when he elaborates:

We say that things advantageous for a healthy body are good for the body without qualification, but things good for a sick body are not, such as medicines and surgery. And similarly we say that the things pleasant for a healthy and complete body are pleasant for the body without qualification, such as to see in the light and not in the dark, although for someone with ophthalmia this is reversed. (*EE* 1235b32-38)

Good, pleasant, and fearful are dispositional properties, and moreover relational ones. To be good is to be such as to benefit someone; to be pleasant is to be such as to please someone; to be fearful is to be such as to frighten someone. When Aristotle calls something good or pleasant or fearful “without qualification” (or “by nature” – see for example *EN* 1148b15), he thus does *not* mean that it has the property non-relationally. Instead, he means that it is such as to benefit or please or frighten someone in the relevant good condition, physical or psychological – a healthy person, or a virtuous one. When he calls something good or pleasant “to someone,” meanwhile, he means to emphasize that it will benefit or please only someone who is in an inferior condition. Things are *F* without qualification, or by nature, when they are such as to be *F* for a person in the relevant good condition.

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<sup>34</sup> τὰ μὲν γὰρ ἀπλῶς, τὰ δὲ τινὶ μὲν καὶ ἡδέα καὶ ἀγαθὰ ἐστίν, ἀπλῶς δ’ οὐ, ἀλλὰ τούναντίον φαῦλα καὶ οὐχ ἡδέα.

Returning now to the *gnôrimon*, we find excellent evidence that Aristotle intends a similar account. A passage from the *Metaphysics* draws the parallel explicitly:

ἡ γὰρ μάθησις οὕτω γίνεται πᾶσι διὰ τῶν ἥττον γνωρίμων φύσει εἰς τὰ γνώριμα  
μᾶλλον· καὶ τοῦτο ἔργον ἐστίν, ὥσπερ ἐν ταῖς πράξεσι τὸ ποιῆσαι ἐκ τῶν ἐκάστῳ  
ἀγαθῶν τὰ ὅλως ἀγαθὰ ἐκάστῳ ἀγαθὰ, οὕτως ἐκ τῶν αὐτῶ γνωριμωτέρων τὰ τῆ  
φύσει γνώριμα αὐτῶ γνώριμα.

Learning comes about for everyone in this way, proceeding by means of what is less *gnôrimon* by nature towards what is more *gnôrimon* [viz., by nature]. And this is the task (*ergon*): just as in actions [the task is] to start from what is good for each person and to make what is in general<sup>35</sup> good also good for each person,<sup>36</sup> so here [it is] to start from what is more *gnôrimon* to oneself and to make what is by nature *gnôrimon* also *gnôrimon* to oneself. (*Met.* 1029b3-8)

Moreover, it is easy to construct an account that makes sense of the parallel. The *gnôrimon* is dispositional, as clear from the *-imon* suffix (recall Smyth’s “able to or fit to”), and it is also relational: what is *gnôrimon* is what affords *gnôsis*, and *gnôsis* is always the activity of an agent. To preserve Aristotle’s parallel with the good and pleasant and fearful, we should thus take it that things are *gnôrimon* without qualification when they are such as to be *gnôrimon* for someone who is in the relevant good condition. Indeed Aristotle makes just this suggestion in the *Topics*:

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<sup>35</sup> *Hôlos*; he is evidently using this to stand in for the usual *haplôs*.

<sup>36</sup> See *EE* 1237a1-2 and *EN* 1129b5-6.

ἕτερα γὰρ ἑτέροις καὶ οὐ ταῦτα πᾶσι τυγχάνει γνωριμώτερα ὄντα... ἔτι τοῖς αὐτοῖς ἄλλοτ' ἄλλα μᾶλλον γνώριμα, ἐξ ἀρχῆς μὲν τὰ αἰσθητά, ἀκριβεστέροις δὲ γενομένοις ἀνάπαλιν... ἴσως δὲ καὶ τὸ ἀπλῶς γνώριμον οὐ τὸ πᾶσι γνώριμόν ἐστιν ἀλλὰ τὸ τοῖς εὖ διακειμένοις τὴν διάνοιαν, καθάπερ καὶ τὸ ἀπλῶς ὑγιεινὸν τὸ τοῖς εὖ ἔχουσι τὸ σῶμα.

Different things are more *gnôrimon* to different people, and not the same things equally to all...Furthermore, to the same persons different things are more *gnôrimon* at different times—first of all the objects of sense-perception, and then, when the [the learners' thinking]<sup>38</sup> becomes more precise (*akribesterois*), the converse occurs [that is, purely intelligible things – elsewhere identified as most *gnôrimon* by nature – become most *gnôrimon* to them]... Perhaps/probably (*isôs*), also, *what is gnôrimon without qualification is what is gnôrimon not to everyone but only to those who are intellectually in a sound condition*, just as also what is healthy without qualification is what is healthy to those who are physically in a sound condition. (*Topics* 141b36-142a11, emphases mine)

We should conclude then that '*gnôrimon*' refers to the same property on both sides of the distinction, with the difference in extension explained by the fact that the property is relational. What is *gnôrimon* without qualification is what is such as to afford *gnôsis* to people in the relevant good condition – that is to say, to intellectually excellent people, those with *sophia* or *phronêsis*.<sup>40</sup> What is *gnôrimon* to us is what is such as to afford *gnôsis* to people who are not yet in such condition.

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. 141b13-14: ἀκριβοῦς...διανοίας.

<sup>40</sup> I here follow Burnyeat, "Understanding," quoted in note 28 above.

Nonetheless, the worry that motivated the charges of equivocation remains, for this might seem just to shift the bump in the rug. Even if we can give a formally unified account of the *gnôrimon* as what affords *gnôsis* – either to just anyone or to the educated person – it may seem that we do so by using ‘*gnôsis*’ to name two radically different phenomena. The pleasure a corrupt person takes in vicious indulgences is recognizably in the same category as the pleasure the virtuous person takes in moderate treats, and likewise for health and benefit and fear; by contrast, as noted above, being familiar with something seems very different from having deep insight into it.

Or might Aristotle in fact be working with some conception of knowledge on which both familiarity and deep insight are members of the same kind? We are looking for a conception of knowledge that meets the following desiderata:<sup>41</sup>

- a) Experience-induced familiarity is a genuine example of it, and the most obvious example (hence Aristotle’s choice of ‘*gnôrimon*,’ a word so strongly associated with familiarity, for its objects).
- b) Deep insight, or reasoned understanding, is also a genuine example of it, and the best example – the one that shows up in superior cases.

Clearly the standard modern conception of knowledge as non-accidentally true belief does not fit the bill. Familiarity with things *gnôrimon* to us must be a genuine and obvious case of *gnôsis*, but familiarity simply is not non-accidentally true belief. First, it can be a relation to an object like a person or pleasure or action or substance, and so cannot be essentially a propositional attitude (see next sections for further discussion). Second, it need not even presuppose or give rise to non-accidentally true belief about its

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<sup>41</sup> And indeed the further desideratum that one-off perception of an object counts as an example too; see next section.

objects. As for deep insight into things *gnôrimon* by nature, there is some evidence that Aristotle thinks of knowledge of essences as non-propositional, in which case it cannot be true belief of any kind.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, since the principles are the most knowable by nature, we should expect the knowledge they yield to be the best knowledge *qua* knowledge, the highest degree of knowledge. But we are not necessarily more certain, justified, luck-immune about the principles than we are about things *gnôrimon* to us: indeed proper perception is as justified and certain as can be. (This is the kind of consideration that has led some to think that *epistêmê* should be construed as *understanding* rather than knowledge: *epistêmê* may not be more justified than lower kinds of knowledge, but it has much more explanatory depth.<sup>43</sup> But understanding cannot be what we are looking for here either, for it clearly fails to meet constraint (a): we can be very familiar with things we do not understand.)

There is however a different conception of knowledge that meets both desiderata: good acquaintance. To be familiar with a person or pleasure or mode of speech is to be well-acquainted with it to some degree: to be aware of some important things about it, to be good at recognizing it, to be cognitively comfortable with it at least to some extent. To have deep insight into an essence, or demonstrative understanding of a theorem, or a full grasp of the human good, is also to be well-acquainted with it: to have its important features thoroughly and clearly revealed to you, to be a real expert about it – to have it be utterly well-known to you. Of course this latter kind of knowing is fuller, deeper, superior along many dimensions. But unlike standard propositional knowledge, good-acquaintance knowledge comes in *degrees*, and hence this difference is no threat to univocity. (Compare: you can be very well-acquainted with a friend and only somewhat well-acquainted with a neighbor, where in both cases what you have is the same *kind* of thing, good acquaintance.)

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<sup>42</sup> That is, *noêsis* of essences is simple, non-predicative: see especially *De Anima* 430b26-30.

<sup>43</sup> See especially Burnyeat, “Understanding”.

Extensionally, then, we can follow Ross: what is more *gnôrimon* to us is what is familiar, while what is more *gnôrimon* by nature is what is more intelligible, i.e. such as to admit a better intellectual grasp. On the interpretation I propose, however, these are not different *senses* of the word, but different grounds of the one feature that constitutes being *gnôrimon*: affording good acquaintance. The difference between the knowledge we have of things *gnôrimon* to us and the knowledge we have of things *gnôrimon* by nature is thus not a difference in kind; instead, it is one of degree.

Recall the opening of the *Physics*, quoted above: our task in philosophical inquiry is to proceed from “what is more *gnôrimon* and clearer to us to what is clearer and more *gnôrimon* by nature,” where the former are perceptible phenomena, and the latter the imperceptible, purely intelligible causes and elements of these. On my proposed interpretation, the idea is that there are certain things in the world – namely the principles in each domain (the four causes, biological essences, the human good, etc.), and ultimately the principles of everything (God, substance) – which, while difficult to get to know because they are imperceptible, lend themselves to excellent acquaintance by the educated mind. They are by nature such as to be deeply and thoroughly well-known.<sup>44</sup> (Below I will add an important complication: Aristotle treats as principles not only objects like God and substance, but also essential *facts* about them. Nonetheless, I will argue, the same idea holds: these facts are *gnôrimon* by nature in that they lend themselves to excellent acquaintance, to being thoroughly and deeply known.)

The *Physics*’ apparent equation of what is *gnôrimon* to us or by nature with what is *clear* (*saphes*) to us or by nature – an equation we will see at many other points as well (see section VIII) – suggests that we

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<sup>44</sup> I am here in agreement with Mansion, “Plus connu,” and direct disagreement with Charlton in his comment *ad Phys.* 184a16-25: the passage does not warrant “the view that Aristotle held that there are realms of more and less intelligible entities” (W. Charlton, *Aristotle, Physics Books I and II* (Oxford, 1995)).



might illuminate Aristotle's distinction through a comparison with a contrast Plato draws in the course of laying out the *Republic's* Sun, Line, and Cave images. Here Plato makes much of the notion of clarity, and strikingly anticipates Aristotle's talk of ascending from what is clear to us to what is clear by nature; he also associates the clear with the knowable. I propose then to use Plato's account as a model for understanding the kind of account I am attributing to Aristotle.<sup>45</sup>

For Plato, just as sunlight illuminates physical objects, allowing our eyes to see them clearly (*saphôs*, *Rep.* 508c), so truth illuminates intelligible objects, allowing the soul to know them (*gignôskein*, 508e). This clarity of cognition has its counterpart in the clarity of the objects: objects that are ontologically prior – higher up the line, outside the cave; that is, closer to the Good, or sun – are better-illuminated and hence clearer (509d, 511a).<sup>46</sup> To prisoners in the cave, however, shadows *seem* clearer than statues, and to ordinary people the things cloaked in the obscurity of the visible realm *seem* clearer than the intelligible objects that are really clear (515e).<sup>47</sup> These claims obviously anticipate Aristotle's distinction between the clear to us and clear by nature.

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<sup>45</sup> Mansion gives a brief treatment of the parallel (“Plus connu,” 168-9); I agree with her general characterization, and aim to fill in the details.

<sup>46</sup> In laying out the sections of the divided line he distinguishes them by their degree of clarity (καί σοι ἔσται σαφηνεία καὶ ἀσαφεία πρὸς ἄλληλα, 509d), with for example the objects of *dianoia* being clear (*enarges*, 511a) by comparison with those below them. Here clarity is a property of the objects (shadows, physical objects, Forms), although later he makes clarity a property of the mental conditions “set over” the objects, corresponding to truth in the objects (ὥσπερ ἐφ’ οἷς ἔστιν ἀληθείας μετέχειν, οὕτω ταῦτα σαφηνείας ἡγησάμενος μετέχειν, 511e).

<sup>47</sup> The newly freed prisoner will consider the shadows clearer than the physical objects that cast them (νομίζειν ταῦτα τῷ ὄντι σαφέστερα τῶν δεικνυμένων, 515e).

Moreover, Plato also anticipates Aristotle's association of clarity in objects with knowability. He does not use 'gnôrimon' in this context, but he does use what Aristotle treats as a synonym, 'gnôston':<sup>48</sup> the powers argument of *Republic V* calls the objects of *epistêmê* "perfectly *gnôston*" and those of ignorance "in no way *gnôston*" (*Rep.* 477a), implying that the in-between things – the objects of *doxa*, which the Cave allegory symbolizes by the shadows and puppets within the cave – are *gnôston* in some way, or to a middling degree. The genuinely clear objects are perfectly knowable; the unclear objects that seem clear to the prisoners are knowable in some deficient way.<sup>49</sup>

Plato also strongly suggests that the salient kind of knowledge is good acquaintance. Like Aristotle's things *gnôrimon* to us, the shadows in the cave are familiar: easily accessed, recognized, and identified. (Recall that good acquaintance comes in degrees: someone who recognizes a shadow does not thereby

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<sup>48</sup> Aristotle treats the two as synonymous in several places; see among others *Met.* 1029b8-12, quoted below.

<sup>49</sup> Would Plato even allow that the cognition one has such of things – *doxa*, or more specifically the prisoners' *eikasia* or the next level, *pistis* – count as *gnôsis*? The text is arguably ambiguous on this point. Certainly *doxa* is distinct from and inferior to *epistêmê*, and Plato often seems to equate *gnôsis* with *epistêmê* (see e.g. 506a), in which case the claim that objects of *doxa* are in a way *gnôston* would mean not that they genuinely afford even a low degree of *gnôsis*, but that they afford something which imitates it. (For discussion, and arguments against the equation of *epistêmê* and *gnôsis* in Plato see W. Schwab, "Understanding *Epistêmê* in Plato's *Republic*," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* (2016), 51: 41-85.) At any rate Aristotle's empiricism, and his general trust in perception, set him apart from Plato and explain why he has no hesitation in counting low-level cognition as a genuine albeit inferior version of the same thing we find at higher levels: knowledge. (Compare Mansion, "Plus connu," 168-70, although based on the misleading claim that Aristotle thinks low-level cognition to be certain; for this general contrast between Plato and Aristotle see Gasser-Wingate, *Empiricism*.)

have excellent knowledge, but is nonetheless *somewhat* well-acquainted with it.) But there is not much there to know. The most one can get out of shadows cognitively is the ability to identify them, remember them, and predict which will appear next (516c-d); they do not lend themselves to fuller scrutiny. The metaphor of clarity as illumination is particularly apt here: even with the best eyesight and illumination one cannot see a shadow clearly, because to illuminate a shadow is to destroy it! Moreover, there is no depth to a shadow, no detail to discover. Shadows are by nature such as to afford no more than easy but shabby good acquaintance.<sup>50</sup>

Like Aristotle's things *gnôrimon* by nature, meanwhile, Plato's ontologically prior things are difficult to know: they can be contemplated only by those who have gone through an arduous education, the journey out of the cave. In particular, the ascent is illustrated as a process of observing and identifying certain objects – that is, becoming well-acquainted with them. When the prisoners first turn from shadows to statues, they are “unable to observe (*kathoran*) them” (515c), and therefore unable to “answer of each what it is” (515d); when they come to things outside the cave they “would not be able to see (*horan*) even one” (516a). Through becoming accustomed (*sunêtheia*, 516a), however, their eyes adjust:

Τελευταῖον δὴ, οἶμαι, τὸν ἥλιον...δύναιτ' ἂν κατιδεῖν καὶ θεάσασθαι οἷός ἐστιν.  
...Καὶ μετὰ ταῦτ' ἂν ἤδη συλλογίζοιτο περὶ αὐτοῦ ὅτι οὗτος ὁ  
τάς τε ὄρας παρέχων καὶ ἐνιαυτοὺς καὶ πάντα ἐπιτροπεύων  
τὰ ἐν τῷ ὀρωμένῳ τόπῳ, καὶ ἐκείνων ὧν σφεῖς ἐώρων τρόπον  
τινὰ πάντων αἴτιος.

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<sup>50</sup> One can get to know more *about* shadows by coming to recognize them as shadows, and knowing their originals, as do the philosophers who return to the cave (*Rep.* 520c); Plato thinks this allows for the clearest possible vision of shadows (*ibid.*). But even for the philosopher, shadows have much less to offer cognitively than do their originals: they are never really clear.

Finally...[the escapee] would be able to see (*katidein*) [the sun] itself by itself in its own place, and observe (*theasthai*) what it is like...And after that he would straightaway reason about it that this is what provides the seasons and the cycles, and governs everything in the visible realm, and is in some way the cause of all the things he had seen before. (*Rep.* 516b4-c2).

Ontologically prior things are harder to observe, and hence harder to get to know. But that is the fault of the prisoners' eyesight, not of the objects; indeed, the things initially most difficult to observe, least clear "to us," are most clear by nature – that is, have an enormous amount to offer the prepared viewer. When one develops the ability to see the sun, to "observe [or perhaps "contemplate" – *theasthai*] what it is like," one can get to know it extremely well: one can learn an enormous amount about it, including that and how it is the cause of everything else.

Plato's Cave allegory thus provides a model for the kind of account I am attributing to Aristotle. Humans have the ability to get to know things in the world – visually, in the allegory, but also intellectually (seeing the sun is an analogy for noetically grasping the Form of the Good). Some things allow for low-level good acquaintance: we can have a kind of sham expertise about them, like prisoners who can predict which shadow comes next. Other things lend themselves to detailed, thorough study, such that when our minds are ready we can get to know them deeply and fully, have excellent insight into them, and use our knowledge of them to understand everything else. This is the distinction between things *gnôrimon* to us and things *gnôrimon* by nature.

Of course, Aristotle disagrees with Plato about which things have this status: he rejects Platonic Forms, replacing them with his own principles, namely God, substance, and the essences within each domain, along with essential facts about these. My suggestion is that he nonetheless sees philosophical education in the way illustrated by the Cave allegory: as a journey from relative good acquaintance with

ontologically derivative things toward genuinely excellent acquaintance with the fundamental principles of reality – things which are such as to lend themselves perfectly to such acquaintance.

One final note on the threat to the unity of *gnôsis* posed by the distinction between things *gnôrimon* by nature and to us: Fine argues that *gnôsis* of the latter cannot be knowledge of any kind, because it is sometimes false.<sup>51</sup> She points out that Aristotle calls *endoxa* (common opinions) *gnôrimon* throughout the *Topics* (see e.g. 159b8-15), despite the fact that *endoxa* can be false, and she also cites a passage that follows lines we saw above on moving from what is *gnôrimon* to us to what is *gnôrimon* by nature:<sup>52</sup>

τὰ δ' ἐκάστοις γνώριμα καὶ πρῶτα πολλάκις ἡρέμα ἐστὶ γνώριμα, καὶ μικρὸν ἢ οὐθὲν ἔχει τοῦ ὄντος· ἀλλ' ὅμως ἐκ τῶν φαύλως μὲν γνωστῶν αὐτῶ δὲ γνωστῶν τὰ ὅλως γνωστὰ γνῶναι πειρατέον, μεταβαίνοντας, ὥσπερ εἴρηται, διὰ τούτων αὐτῶν.

Things that are *gnôrimon* to each person at first will often be only slightly (*êrema*) *gnôrimon*, and will have little or nothing of being. Nevertheless, starting from things that are poorly (*phaulôs*) *gnôston* but *gnôston* to oneself, one must try as I have said to advance by means of these to know (*gnônai*) what is entirely *gnôsta*. (*Met.* 1029b8-12)

I am not convinced that any of these passages really show that *gnôrimon* things can be false. The lines from the *Metaphysics* may imply only that the things *gnôrimon* to us are ontologically very inferior to the

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<sup>51</sup> Fine, “Aristotle on Knowledge”.

<sup>52</sup> Fine also cites *Physics* 184b12-14 where a child calls all men ‘father’ and all women ‘mother’; as she acknowledges, however, it is very unclear what if anything Aristotle is labeling as *gnôrimon* here, and I do not think that we can take the passage as strong evidence for her view.

things “prior in being” (they are derivative phenomena, by contrast with primary causes and principles); as to *endoxa*, Aristotle may not mean that all *endoxa* are *gnôrima*, but only the true ones.<sup>54</sup> The interpretation of *gnôsis* as good acquaintance rather than standard propositional knowledge can however accommodate these passages even if we do follow Fine. One can be genuinely well-acquainted with sham copies (things with little or no reality), or with false views (such as fictions, or obsolete scientific theories): one can be good at recognizing them, be aware of their important features, even understand them. So *if* Fine is right, this turns out to be another argument in support of my account of *gnôsis* as good acquaintance: it can accommodate the whole gamut of things Aristotle calls *gnôrimon*, while an account of *gnôsis* as standard propositional knowledge certainly cannot.

To sum up: I have argued that although things *gnôrimon* to us are familiar, and things *gnôrimon* by nature intelligible, ‘*gnôrimon*’ has a single meaning throughout. To be *gnôrimon* is to afford *gnôsis*, where *gnôsis* is good acquaintance. Thus an account of *gnôsis* as good acquaintance meets the exegetical constraints on a unified account of knowledge stemming from Aristotle’s distinction between the *gnôrimon* to us and the *gnôrimon* by nature: it makes sense of the idea that both familiarity and deep insight are genuine instances of knowledge, with deep insight being the best kind of knowledge *qua* knowledge.

#### **IV. Confirmation**

In this section I show that this account of the *gnôrimon* holds up well across a wide range of contexts. I cannot survey Aristotle’s every use of the term, but will give a representative sample, leaving out for now the problematic case to which I turn in the next sections: propositions. I aim to show that whenever Aristotle calls a thing *gnôrimon*, he does indeed mean either that it is such as to afford easy but limited

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<sup>54</sup> Compare Bronstein’s response to Fine (Bronstein, *Knowledge and Learning*, 17 note 26).

good acquaintance to those who are exposed to it, or that it is such as to afford thorough, deep, excellent acquaintance to the mind that is ready to access it.

First, a brief survey of his discussions of things *gnôrimon* to us. As we saw above, Aristotle follows popular usage in applying ‘*gnôrimon*’ to people where he obviously means either that we are acquainted with them through direct exposure or reputation, or that they are the people to know (notables, the upper-class). (See among many other examples *EN* 1126b25 and *Politics* 1274a18). He also applies the term to other things that are familiar, things to which we have been frequently exposed, and many of his uses of ‘*gnôrimon*’ clearly fall into this category, even when he does not explicitly include the qualifier ‘to us’.

In particular, as the *Posterior Analytics*’ pronouncement that things *gnôrimon* to us are closer to perception entails (*APo.* 71b33–72a5, quoted above), he often identifies things as *gnôrimon* where he seems to mean that we do or easily can become relatively well-acquainted with them through perception. For example, bodily pleasures are *gnôrimoi* because they are the ones all people experience (*EN* 1153b35–54a1); perceptible substances are *gnôrimon* to us and thus should be the starting-points of our inquiry because they are perceptible (*Met.* 1029a33–b12); it is unhelpful to explain fire as what is similar to the soul, for fire (a perceptible) is more *gnôrimon* than soul (an imperceptible) (*Topics* 129b10–15).

A fuller defense of this account would require a careful study of perception, the way it gives us *gnôsis*, and its limitations, but the general idea is I hope clear: perception makes particular things *gnôrimon* to us in that through it we come to know what perceptible things are like. We become well-acquainted with perceptible properties, insofar as such superficial things allow. That is why perceptions are “the most authoritative *gnôseis* of particulars” (*Met.* 981b11). Through higher forms of study one can learn facts about how perceptible objects instantiate universal features, how they are causally connected to other perceptible objects, and so on. But to get to know the particular taste and color of this particular apple – to become well-acquainted with them – there is no better route than perception. Compare Russell on

perception: “I know the colour perfectly and completely when I see it, and no further knowledge of it itself is even theoretically possible;” through perception, the direct objects of perception are “immediately known to me just as they are.”<sup>55</sup> On Russell’s view the direct objects of perception are sense-data, while on Aristotle’s they are features of external objects – colors, shapes and the like; moreover, Russell takes perception as a paradigm of knowledge, while for Aristotle the knowledge we have through perception is slight (perceptibles are *gnôrimon* only to us, not without qualification). But the general claim is the same: through perception, we are as well-acquainted with perceptibles as one can be.<sup>56</sup>

It is debatable whether the good acquaintance in question is always best construed as familiarity. If you glance just once at an apple, you are not familiar with its color in the sense of being accustomed to it: it is repeated perceptions that bring about that kind of familiarity. Nonetheless, if your senses are functioning properly, the light is good, etc., you are well-acquainted with the color. You are missing nothing about it; it is thoroughly revealed to you. Given that perceptibles are paradigms of things *gnôrimon* to us, this is further evidence that that phrase does not *mean* ‘familiar’. Instead, analogous to pleasures or speeches to which one is accustomed, a color one has seen just once is the object of superficial, relative good acquaintance.

Thus an account of the *gnôrimon* as what affords good acquaintance covers Aristotle’s discussions of things *gnôrimon* to us. Now for a brief survey of his discussions of things *gnôrimon* by nature.

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<sup>55</sup> B. Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (London, 1912), at 47.

<sup>56</sup> This is compatible with the view that the knowledge we have through perception is lesser than what we have through intellect, as Aristotle clearly holds. Like Plato’s cave-shadows, perceptibles offer little to the knower, so even when we know them as well as they can be known, our knowledge of them is deficient. Compare: I love chocolate as much as any food can be loved, but I love my mother more – more fully and deeply – because mothers are more lovable than chocolate.



As we learn from *APo.* 72a1-5, quoted above, such things are accessible through intellect rather than perception.<sup>57</sup> Thus they are harder to get to know. Nonetheless, they are most *gnôrimon* by nature. Why? Metaphysically, the feature that Aristotle most emphasizes is that they are ontologically prior to things that are less *gnôrimon* by nature. Things that are more *gnôrimon* (*viz.*, by nature – I will let that qualification go unstated in the remainder of this section) are more fundamental: they explain the less *gnôrimon* things, either as parts or as other kinds of causes.<sup>58</sup>

We see this at the start of the *Physics*. Just before the claim that inquiry must progress toward the things more *gnôrimon* by nature (184a16–21 quoted above), Aristotle has said:

τότε γὰρ οἰόμεθα γινώσκειν ἕκαστον,  
ὅταν τὰ αἴτια γνωρίσωμεν τὰ πρῶτα καὶ τὰς ἀρχὰς τὰς  
πρώτας καὶ μέχρι τῶν στοιχείων.

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<sup>57</sup> “By prior and more *gnôrimon* relative to us I mean things that are closer to perception; by prior and more *gnôrimon* without qualification I mean things that are further away [from perception].”

<sup>58</sup> There is a worry here: Aristotle at least often characterizes universals as ontologically posterior to particulars, but also associates them with causes and intelligibles, which are ontologically prior (as well as more *gnôrimon* by nature); moreover at *APo.* 71b20–72a5 universals are both prior and more *gnôrimon* by nature. While I will not try to defend the suggestion here, we might try to solve the tension as follows: the universals which are more *gnôrimon* by nature are not universal *things* (like the *Categories*’ secondary substances), but instead (as the context of the *APo.* passage strongly suggests) universal *facts*, and Aristotle thinks that these are indeed ontologically prior to, causes of, particular facts. I discuss the idea that facts can be more and less *gnôrimon* by nature in the next section.

We think we know (*gignôsekin*) each [subject] when we recognize/know (*gnôrisômen*) its primary causes and principles, and up to its elements (*Physics* 184a13-14)

In other words, the causes and principles and elements are the things most *gnôrimon* by nature. We see this also in regard to some specific domains:

ἀπλῶς μὲν οὖν γνωριμώτερον τὸ πρότερον τοῦ ὑστέρου, οἷον στιγμή γραμμῆς καὶ γραμμῆ ἐπιπέδου καὶ ἐπίπεδον στερεοῦ, καθάπερ καὶ μονὰς ἀριθμοῦ ... τὰ μὲν γὰρ τῆς τυχούσης τὰ δ' ἀκριβοῦς καὶ περιττῆς διανοίας καταμαθεῖν ἐστίν.

[T]he prior is more *gnôrimon* without qualification (*haplôs*) than the posterior; for example, a point is more *gnôrimon* than a line, a line than a plane, and a plane than a solid, just as also a unit is more *gnôrimon* than a number...for it belongs to any old mind (*dianoia*) to grasp (*katamathein*) the former things, but to grasp the latter belongs to a mind that is precise and superior. (*Topics* 141b5-14, based on Forster trans.)

ταῦτα δὲ τῶν ἀπλῶς γνωριμωτέρων καὶ προτέρων τοῦ εἶδους ἐστίν....  
τοῦ μὲν γὰρ εἶδους γνωριζομένου ἀνάγκη καὶ τὸ γένος καὶ τὴν διαφορὰν γνωρίζεσθαι.

[The genus and the differentiae] are among the things which are more *gnôrimon* without qualification than and prior to the species...for, if the species is known

(*gnôrizomenou*), it is necessary that both the genus and the differentia also be known.  
(*Topics* 141b25-34)

Ἀεὶ γὰρ γνωριμώτερα τὰ πρότερα τῶν ὑστέρων καὶ τὰ βελτίω τὴν φύσιν τῶν χειρόνων... αἰτία τε μᾶλλον τὰ πρότερα τῶν ὑστέρων· ἐκείνων γὰρ ἀναιρουμένων ἀναιρεῖται τὰ τὴν οὐσίαν ἐξ ἐκείνων ἔχοντα, μήκη μὲν ἀριθμῶν, ἐπίπεδα δὲ μηκῶν, στερεὰ δὲ ἐπιπέδων, στοιχείων δ' αἰ ὀνομαζόμεναι συλλαβαί... Ὀμοίως δὲ καὶ τῶν περὶ φύσεως· πολὺ γὰρ πρότερον ἀναγκαῖον τῶν αἰτίων καὶ τῶν στοιχείων εἶναι φρόνησιν ἢ τῶν ὑστέρων· ... Εἴτε γὰρ πῦρ εἴτ' ἀήρ εἴτ' ἀριθμὸς εἴτ' ἄλλαι τινὲς φύσεις αἰτίαι καὶ πρῶται τῶν ἄλλων, ἀδύνατον τῶν ἄλλων τι γινώσκειν ἐκείνας ἀγνοοῦντας· πῶς γὰρ ἂν τις ἢ λόγον γνωρίζοι συλλαβὰς ἀγνοῶν, ἢ ταύτας ἐπίστατο μηδὲν τῶν στοιχείων εἰδώς;

Prior things are always more *gnôrimon* [viz., by nature] than posterior things, and what is better in nature than what is worse ... And prior things are causes more than posterior things (for if these are removed, then so too are the things which have their being from them: if numbers then lines, if lines then surfaces, and if surfaces then solids), and letters [are causes more] than the things called 'syllables'. ... Likewise concerning nature; for it is very necessary for there to be wisdom (*phronêsis*) of the causes and elements before [there is wisdom of] the things posterior to them... For whether it is fire or air or number or any other natures that are causes of and primary to other things, it would be impossible to know (*gignôskein*) any of the other things while being ignorant about these. For how could anyone either know (*gnôrizoin*) speech and be ignorant of syllables, or know them without knowing any of their elements? (*Protrepticus* B32-36)

Why should the ontologically prior things be more *gnôrimon* than the posterior? The implication of these passages is that they are more *gnôrimon* precisely *because* they are ontologically prior. That is, because they explain the posterior without being explained by them, we can get to know the prior things in themselves, without needing to turn elsewhere, while we can get to know the posterior things well only through knowledge of the prior things. Like Plato's Forms or Sun, the prior things are self-revealing, offering up full acquaintance with themselves to the educated mind:

...τὰ μὲν δι' αὐτῶν πέφυκε γνωρίζεσθαι τὰ δὲ δι' ἄλλων  
(αἱ μὲν γὰρ ἀρχαὶ δι' αὐτῶν, τὰ δ' ὑπὸ τὰς ἀρχὰς δι' ἄλλων)...

Some things are by nature known (*gnôrizesthai*) through themselves, and others through other things – for the principles [viz., things most *gnôrimon* by nature] are [known] through themselves, while the things which fall under the principles are [known] through other things ... (*APr.* 64b34-36)

This supports the picture developed above: the things most *gnôrimon* by nature lend themselves most to full acquaintance, in and through themselves. (Of course to get ourselves into the position where we can know these things we will have had to rely on perceptible things, going through the process of induction; the claim is that once we are in a position to contemplate these things directly, they contain in themselves all we need to know to make sense of them.)

A fuller study of Aristotle's principles, causes, and elements would show that, like Plato's Sun in the Cave allegory, these things indeed offer a lot to know. They are rich; they are clear; they are stable; they are "more true" than the things that derive from them.<sup>62</sup> (Parallel claims will hold for the *gnôrimon*-by-nature facts or propositions we consider below.) Why should these qualities go hand in hand with being

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<sup>62</sup> For this last claim see *Met.* 993b19–30.

more knowledge-affording? I submit that Aristotle's idea is that rich, clear, stable, true things are such that one can get to know them thoroughly and deeply – such that they can be the objects of excellent acquaintance.

I hope in this brief review to have provided confirmation that in labelling things as *gnôrimon* Aristotle consistently means that they offer good acquaintance – either genuine and deep good acquaintance in the case of things *gnôrimon* by nature, or relative and shallow good acquaintance in the case of things *gnôrimon* to us. I will turn now to the case that appears to pose a counterexample: propositions.

#### **V. *Gnôrimon* propositions**

Alongside all the things listed above (people, pleasures, substances, lines, points, species, genera, and so on), Aristotle also uses '*gnôrimon*' to characterize things of quite a different nature: accounts (*logoi*), predications, the premises and conclusions of syllogisms, and facts and their explanations ("the that" and "the why") – in short, propositions or facts. (Note: I am here assuming that Aristotle equates true propositions and facts. Or rather, I am using both terms to refer to whatever it is he means to capture with his talk of knowing *that* such-and-such: a proposition, a fact, or perhaps a state of affairs or a predicative complex (*Met.* 1051a34-b4) – at any rate something complex rather than simple, expressible in predicative language but existing independently of it.)<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> For my purposes there is no need to take a stand on the nature of these truth-makers for predicative sentences; for further discussion see P. Crivelli, *Aristotle on Truth* (Cambridge, 2004) and J. Szaif, "Plato and Aristotle on Truth and Falsehood," in M. Glanzberg ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Truth*, (Oxford, 2018), 9-49.

We have already seen instances of this use. For example, in a passage we saw above from *Posterior Analytics* I.2 he asserts that the principles of demonstrations – which he goes on to identify as premises or propositions (*protaseis*, 72a7) – are more *gnôrimon* than the conclusions:

ἀνάγκη καὶ τὴν ἀποδεικτικὴν ἐπιστήμην ἐξ ἀληθῶν τ' εἶναι καὶ πρώτων καὶ ἀμέσων καὶ γνωριμωτέρων καὶ προτέρων καὶ αἰτίων τοῦ συμπεράσματος.

It is necessary that demonstrative *epistêmê* be from things [viz., principles] true and primary and immediate and more *gnôrimon* and prior to and causes of the conclusion. (*APo.* 71b20-23)

Later in the work he refers to several specific propositions as *gnôrimon*. For example:

τὸ δ' ὅτι τὸ Α τῷ Δ πρότερον καὶ γνωριμώτερον ἢ ὅτι τὸ Α τῷ Ε· διὰ γὰρ τούτου ἐκεῖ νο ἀποδείκνυται...γνωριμώτερον δι' οὗ δείκνυται καὶ πιστότερον

That *A* holds of *D* is prior to and more *gnôrimon* than that *A* holds of *E*; for the latter is demonstrated through the former;...that through which something is proved is more *gnôrimon* and more convincing than it. (*APo.* 86b3-5, 86b27)

In the *Topics* too he speaks of the premises and conclusions of arguments as *gnôrimon*:

ὁ καλῶς συλλογιζόμενος ἐξ ἐνδοξοτέρων καὶ γνωριμω-τέρων τὸ προβληθὲν ἀποδείκνυσι...διὰ τῶν γνωριμωτέρων τὸ ἥττον γνώριμον περαίνεσθαι.

[W]hoever deduces (*sullogizomenos*) well proves the problem from more widely-accepted (*endoxon*) and more *gnôrimon* things...it is through things more *gnôrimon* that the less *gnôrimon* is to be concluded. (*Topics* 159b8-15)

In the *Metaphysics* he refers to the Principle of Non-Contradiction as *gnôrimon*: that it is impossible for the same thing to hold and not hold (at the same time of the same thing in the same respect) is the most *gnôrimon* principle of all (*Met.* 1005b13).<sup>64</sup> He also applies ‘*gnôrimon*’ to various accounts, where these are clearly things with propositional structure: for example Democritus explains more *gnôrimôs* why mules are infertile than does Empedocles (*GA* 747a27).

Does he mean that accounts, as well as people and pleasures and the like, are the objects of good acquaintance? A modern reader might assume that this cannot be what Aristotle intends. Accounts can be known, but (the objection goes), the relevant kind of knowledge has nothing to do with good acquaintance; it is instead precisely the kind of thing that tends to be the focus of modern epistemology – roughly, non-accidentally true belief.

If this is right, then Aristotle’s ‘*gnôrimon*’ and ‘*gnôsis*’ both turn out to be ambiguous, with their application to propositions requiring a different interpretation from their application to other objects. And the proponent of this view might further argue that this ambiguity is precisely what we should

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<sup>64</sup> This is a particularly difficult discussion, which raises questions about many of the issues I discuss here: the PNC seems to be both *gnôrimon* to us *and* by nature; it is also maximally firm (*bebaion*), which implies that we have great conviction (*pistis*) in it, and this is somehow intimately related to its being *gnôrimon*. The epistemology of this passage merits a paper of its own; for good discussion see among others W. Wians, “The Philosopher’s Knowledge of Non-Contradiction,” *Ancient Philosophy* 26 (2006): 333-353.

expect, on the grounds that propositional knowledge is one thing, objectual knowledge another. As contemporary English-speaking epistemologists have long noted, the distinction is robust enough that many languages mark it explicitly (such as French, with *savoir* vs. *connaître*). It is often thought that Ancient Greek did so too, with *gnôrizēin*, *gignôskesthai*, and *gnôsis* all on the objectual side.<sup>65</sup> This linguistic claim has been strongly criticized;<sup>66</sup> nonetheless, one might think that even if Aristotle lacks systematic vocabulary for distinguishing propositional and objectual knowledge, he surely recognizes that difference – and along with it the difference between two ways of being *gnôrimon*. A known or knowable person or pleasure or substance or property is one that is or could be the object of good acquaintance; a known or knowable proposition, on the other hand, is one to which we bear or could bear a particular kind of propositional attitude, something like non-accidentally true belief. And thus we should not be at all surprised to find this ambiguity in Aristotle’s use of ‘*gnôrimon*’.

If this were right, then even if good acquaintance is an important concept in Aristotle’s epistemology, it would not be the main one. For the best kinds of *gnôsis*, such as *epistêmê* of the conclusions of demonstrations and *phronêsis* of facts about the human good, have propositional structure, and would thus be propositional knowledge by contrast with good acquaintance.

One might further argue that Aristotle was working with a specific model of propositional knowledge: to know that *p* is to believe that *p* truly and with *certainty*. Consider his elaboration on the claim that premises of demonstration must be more *gnôrimon* than the conclusion:

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<sup>65</sup> Thus for example the LSJ (new ninth ed, 1940) entry for γινώσκω: ‘as dist. fr. οἶδα know by reflection, γινώσκω = know by observation’.

<sup>66</sup> See Burnyeat, “*Epistêmê*”. Most saliently for our purposes, the *gnôsis* words can all take *that* clauses.



Ἐπεὶ δὲ δεῖ πιστεύειν τε καὶ εἰδέναι τὸ πρᾶγμα τῷ τοιοῦτον ἔχειν συλλογισμὸν ὃν  
καλοῦμεν ἀπόδειξιν, ... εἴπερ ἴσμεν διὰ τὰ πρῶτα καὶ πιστεύομεν, κάκεῖνα ἴσμεν τε  
καὶ πιστεύομεν μᾶλλον, ὅτι δι' ἐκεῖνα καὶ τὰ ὕστερα...  
ἀλλὰ μηδ' ἄλλο αὐτῷ πιστότερον εἶναι μηδὲ γνωριμώτερον τῶν  
ἀντικειμένων ταῖς ἀρχαῖς ἐξ ὧν ἔσται συλλογισμὸς ὁ τῆς ἐναντίας ἀπάτης,  
εἴπερ δεῖ τὸν ἐπιστάμενον ἀπλῶς ἀμετάπειστον εἶναι.

Since one must be *convinced of* (*pisteuein*) and *know* (*eidenai*) the matter by having  
the kind of syllogism we call a demonstration...if we *know and are convinced* on  
account of the primitives, we must also *know and be convinced* of them more,  
because on account of them we also [know and are convinced of] the derivative  
things...Nor must there be anything more convincing or more *gnōrimon* among the  
opposites of the principles...since the one who has *epistēmē* without qualification  
must be unpersuadable [i.e. be firmly convinced]. (*APo.* 72a25-72b4, emphases  
mine)

This association of knowing with being convinced shows up also at *APo.* 86b27-28, quoted above, and at  
*APr.* 64b32.<sup>68</sup> In his commentary on the *Posterior Analytics*, Barnes takes the association to reveal the

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<sup>68</sup> An argument is question-beginning if the premises are not more *gnōston* than the conclusions, “for  
demonstration is from things prior and more convincing (*piston*)” (...εἰ δι' ἀγνωστοτέρων ἢ ὁμοίως  
ἀγνώστων, καὶ εἰ διὰ τῶν ὑστέρων τὸ πρότερον· ἢ γὰρ ἀπόδειξις ἐκ πιστοτέρων τε καὶ προτέρων ἐστίν)  
(*APr.* 64b31-33).

nature of Aristotelian knowledge. Like Locke and other moderns, he argues, Aristotle thinks of knowing as having a special attitude toward a proposition, one that includes being certain of its truth:<sup>69</sup>

[P]art of the notion of *knowing that P* is *being convinced that P*; since I can be more convinced that *P* than I am that *Q*, I can be said, in a reasonably intelligible sense, to know that *P* ‘more’ than I know that *Q*...[So Aristotle’s claim that the principles of demonstration are more knowable than the conclusions] can then be defended on Lockean grounds [*viz.*, as claim that the conclusion cannot be more *certain* than the starting-point ] (Barnes, *Posterior Analytics*, 102)

This account of knowledge-as-certainty would need some elaboration; in broad outline, however, Barnes’ interpretation may strike readers as obviously right. Of course (one might think) when Aristotle calls the principles and conclusions of demonstrations *gnôrimon* he means that we have propositional knowledge of them, and he very naturally takes such knowledge to be a special secure relation to true propositions, one that includes certainty. (Once we go this route, moreover, we will be on the lookout for signs of concern with justification and evidence and doubt-removers, just what Barnes and others find in the *Posterior Analytics*’ account of the conditions for *nous* and *epistêmê*.)<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Locke contrasts mere judgment with “clear and certain knowledge...whereby [the mind] certainly perceives, and is undoubtedly satisfied of” the truth or falsity of a proposition (Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* IV.14.3-4. [Citation format: year, place] Compare Ayer, whose account of knowledge serves as one of Gettier’s two examples of the “justified true belief” analysis: knowing that *P* involves being *sure* that *P* is true (and also having the right to be sure) (A.J. Ayer, *The Problem of Knowledge* (London, 1956) [Missing a bracket].

<sup>70</sup> For disagreement see Burnyeat, “Understanding”; for a good overview of the debate see J. Lennox, *Aristotle on Inquiry: Erotetic Frameworks and Domain-Specific Norms*, (Cambridge, 2021).

In the next sections I aim to show that that this understanding of *gnôrimon* propositions as objects of propositional knowledge, and in particular as objects of knowledge-as-certainty, is not supported by Aristotle's texts. Unlike modern epistemologists, *Aristotle does not work with any sharp distinction between propositional and objectual knowledge. Instead he has one unitary notion of knowledge: good acquaintance.* When he speaks of knowing propositions or facts, or calls these *gnôrimon*, he means that they are or are fit to be objects of good acquaintance, either to us or by nature.

After all, just as one can be well-acquainted with a thing, such as Socrates or the universal kind triangle, one can also be well-acquainted with a fact, such as that Socrates is a philosopher or that triangles have angles summing to two right angles. Being well-acquainted with a fact is not the same as being certain of it, or being justified in believing it, or any other distinctively propositional attitude, although it may well entail these. It is more like knowing Socrates, or triangles. I submit that when Aristotle speaks of propositions as *gnôrimon*, this is what he has in mind.<sup>71</sup>

One might protest that this undermines my interpretation of *gnôsis* as good acquaintance, since if the notion of knowledge as good acquaintance has any teeth it must depend on the contrast between knowing objects and knowing propositions. But this is not so. The fact is that Aristotle himself shows very little

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<sup>71</sup> I am here in agreement with Salmieri: “[E]ven propositional knowledge is to be understood in terms of acquaintance with objects. A proposition combines a predicate and a subject (in a certain specialized way); for the proposition to be true is for the items referred to by the two terms to be (appropriately) combined in reality, and to know the proposition is to be acquainted with this real combination... more or less well along various dimensions.” (Salmieri, “*Epistêmê*,” 6). Although this is a point for another occasion, I also agree with Salmieri that in many cases this will be a matter of *understanding* the proposition – of seeing *why* the predicate attaches to the subject.

awareness of or interest in the difference between objectual and propositional knowledge. Following ordinary Greek usage he uses both that-clauses and object-clauses with each of his knowledge terms (such as *gignôskein*, *gnôsis*, *epistêmê*, *epistasthai*, *eidenai*, *aisthanesthai*, *aisthêsis*, *empeiria*); moreover, in his discussions of the objects of all these kinds of knowledge – for example principles, perceptibles, universals, particulars, things that can be or cannot be otherwise – he seems to switch casually between objectual and propositional characterizations.<sup>72</sup>

Aristotle might of course think that objectual and propositional knowledge are importantly different, and simply fail to track the difference, but there is a more charitable and interesting hypothesis: he thinks of knowledge as an attitude that one can bear indifferently either to objects or to true propositions, and so sees no need to mark the difference. What attitude could that be? Clearly it cannot be true belief, certainty, or any other strictly propositional attitude, for these cannot be borne towards people or triangles. But we have already seen that his choice of ‘*gnôrimon*’ suggests that he takes as his paradigm of knowledge the cognitive relation one has to a well-known person: good acquaintance. And just as one

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<sup>72</sup> This is well-noted in regard to perception (see for example P. Gregorić and F. Grgić, “Aristotle’s notion of experience,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 88 (2006): 1-30, 11) and in regard to *nous* of principles (see for example Barnes, *Posterior Analytics*, 271), but we see it in regard to the other kinds of *gnôsis* as well. For example, sometimes *epistêmê* is of objects (“natural-science *epistêmê* is about one genus of being” (φυσικὴ ἐπιστήμη τυγχάνει οὕσα περὶ γένος τι τοῦ ὄντος, *Met.* 1025b19); the object of *epistêmê* (*epistêton*) is something necessary, ungenerated and imperishable, viz. a thing (*EN* 1139b21-24)), but often *epistêmê* is instead of the conclusions of demonstrations, which are propositions (*APo. passim*). There are parallels for *phronêsis* and *technê*, especially in Aristotle’s apparent indifference to the question of whether the things he identifies as their objects – “things that can be otherwise,” or “particulars and universals” in the relevant domains – are to be understood as facts (e.g. *EN* 1141b18-19) or instead as objects like actions (e.g. *EN* 1140a1-13).

can be well-acquainted with an object that is a person, one can be well-acquainted with an object that is a fact. Good acquaintance is a matter of having the thing be revealed to one (either superficially and to a low degree, through familiarity, or deeply and to a high degree, through insight or understanding). Surely one can bear these relations to an Aristotelian proposition or fact: one can be more or less well-acquainted with its parts – the subject and the predicate – and with the connection between them.

If this is right, then in calling propositions and accounts *gnôrimon* Aristotle does not mean to invoke a kind of knowledge distinct from good acquaintance. All *gnôsis*, including the propositional varieties such as *epistêmê*, is good acquaintance.

Before I turn to the positive case for this account, what about the evidence for the knowledge-as-certainty view? We have seen that Aristotle repeatedly correlates the *gnôrimon* with the convincing (*piston*), claiming for example that the premises of demonstration must be both more *gnôrimon* and more convincing than the conclusions. On Barnes' view, the premises are more *gnôrimon* because they are more convincing: knowing is a matter of being certain, so a proposition of which one is more certain is thereby better known. There is an obvious objection to this account, to which I return below: it moves from degrees of certainty, a familiar notion, to degrees of propositional knowledge, a mysterious one. One might suppose however that we simply have to accept that move as “reasonably intelligible” (in Barnes' words), on the grounds that it alone can explain Aristotle's close correlation between “more convincing” and “more known”.

In fact, however, the reverse account would explain the correlation just as well. Aristotle might hold that when a fact is better known, it is for that reason more convincing: we are more convinced by the

principles *because we know them better*, rather than vice versa.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, this is an appealing view if we take knowledge to be a matter of good acquaintance. When we are more thoroughly, deeply acquainted with a fact, we are for that reason more fully convinced that it obtains. Good acquaintance makes us more firmly convinced, less vulnerable to having our minds changed – just as good acquaintance with a person grounds *pistis* in the closely related sense of trust:

...ἀγνωῖτες ἀλλήλοις ἔσονται πάντες [ἢ γὰρ γνῶσις πίστιν ποιεῖ μᾶλλον πρὸς ἀλλήλους].

[*Pistis* is eroded in a tyranny, where] people are unknown (*agnôtes*) to each other, for *gnôsis* more produces *pistis* in one another (*gnôsis pistin poiei mallon pros allêlous*) (*Pol.* 1313b5-6)

Plausibly Aristotle holds that conviction follows knowledge, rather than being constitutive of it.

Is there any other direct evidence for the knowledge-as-certainty view? There are a few passages where in applying ‘*gnôrimon*’ or ‘clear’ to propositions or facts Aristotle can be construed as primarily intending the claim that we know the fact to obtain (know the proposition to be true), as the knowledge-as-certainty interpretation would predict. Here is the clearest example I have found. When one attempts to characterize something by its *propria* (necessary but non-essential properties):

δεῖ γὰρ μὴ μόνον εἶναι γνωριμώτερον τοῦ πράγματος, ἀλλὰ καὶ ὅτι τῷδ’ ὑπάρχει γνωριμώτερον· ὁ μὴ γὰρ εἰδῶς εἰ τῷδ’ ὑπάρχει οὐδ’ εἰ τῷδε ὑπάρχει μόνῳ γνωριεῖ,

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<sup>73</sup> See Burnyeat: “[T]he explanation, being prior to what it explains, is more knowable or familiar in the order of nature (*gnôrimôteron têi phusêi*), and if it is more knowable, then ([Aristotle] infers or assumes) it is more believable and convincing (*piston*) as well” (“Understanding,” 127).

ὥσθ' ὁποτέρου τούτων συμβάντος ἀσαφὲς γίνεται τὸ ἴδιον.  
οἷον ἐπεὶ ὁ θεὸς πυρὸς ἴδιον τὸ ἐν ᾧ πρώτῳ ψυχῇ πέφυκεν  
εἶναι ἀγνωστοτέρῳ κέχρηται τοῦ πυρὸς τῷ εἰ ἐν τούτῳ ὑπάρχει ψυχῇ καὶ εἰ ἐν  
πρώτῳ ὑπάρχει, οὐκ ἂν εἴη καλῶς κείμενον ἴδιον πυρὸς τὸ ἐν ᾧ πρώτῳ ψυχῇ  
πέφυκεν εἶναι.

[The putative proprium] should not only be more *gnôrimon* than the subject, but also *that (hoti)* it belongs to this should be more *gnôrimon* [viz., than the subject]. For the one who doesn't know whether (*ei*) it belongs to this will neither know whether it belongs to this alone, so that if either of these two things occur the proprium will become unclear. For example, since the one positing “that in which soul belongs primarily by nature” as a proprium of fire is using *something less known (agnôsterôî) than fire – the whether soul belongs to this and whether it belongs to this primarily* – he will not have laid down well that [this] is a proprium of fire.<sup>74</sup> (*Topics* 129b14-21, emphases mine)

Here for a proposition *p* (“that in which soul belongs primarily by nature is a proprium of fire”) to be *gnôrimon* is for us to know *whether p*. Does this show that Aristotle means that for a proposition to be known is for us to be sure of its truth? If so, he is equivocating between two senses of ‘known’ without marking the difference. For in saying at the start of the passage that the proprium should be more *gnôrimon* than the subject, he clearly means that it should be an object of better acquaintance; moreover, in ranking *p* as “less known” (*agnôsteron*) than a familiar object, he very strongly implies that there is one single way of being-known at issue, something which belongs more to fire than to *p*.

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<sup>74</sup> I am grateful to the journal referee for help with this passage.

Is Aristotle just failing to respect the difference between “proposition  $p$  is known [viz., certain]” and “fire is known [viz., familiar/understood]”? More charitably, throughout this passage he means by *gnôrimon* just what he usually means. The claim is that  $p$  is deficiently known not because we are uncertain of it, but because we are not well-acquainted with it.<sup>75</sup> As for the relevance of the “whether it obtains” question, ignorance about whether a proposition is true is an obstacle to good acquaintance with it. If one *were* well-acquainted with  $p$ , one would also be certain whether it obtained. (To be well-acquainted with a fact entails recognizing that it is indeed a fact; plausibly also to be well-acquainted with a false theory would involve recognizing it as such.)

Thus passages that seem to appeal to knowledge-as-certainty can be read as appealing instead to knowledge-as-good-acquaintance. The reverse, I will show below, does not hold.

Finally, a brief remark about how this part of my argument relates to other work on Aristotle’s epistemology. In rejecting Barnes’ interpretation of more *gnôrimon* as more certain, I join Burnyeat and others in arguing that the requirements Aristotle places on *epistêmê* in the *Posterior Analytics* are not about justification. In defending my own interpretation of *gnôrimon*-by-nature facts, I will wind up defending a view that fits well with Burnyeat’s and other’s claim that *epistêmê* is less like non-accidentally true belief and more like understanding – a deep and systematic grasp of its objects. Although this claim is not my focus here, it follows from the account of *gnôsis* as good acquaintance, because (i) Aristotle holds that the domains that form the subject-matter of *epistêmê* are complex and causally structured, and (ii) to be really well-acquainted with something complex and causally structured

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<sup>75</sup> It is not familiar – not widely known, frequently encountered. Perhaps he also means that it is not *gnôrimon* by nature: not something that can be deeply or fully understood – presumably because he does not think it true!



just *is* to understand it. I develop these thoughts on *epistêmê*, knowledge, and understanding in other work; here my focus is on the nature of the *gnôrimon*.

I turn now to the positive case that ‘*gnôrimon*’ means the same in application to propositions as to objects: that which affords good acquaintance.

## **VI. Propositions as *gnôrimon* to us**

Aristotle sometimes calls a proposition *gnôrimon* where it is either explicit or clear from context that he means that it is *gnôrimon* “to us;” there is good evidence that, just as with pleasures or substances, he means that we are relatively well-acquainted with the proposition (or corresponding fact), on the basis of familiarity. For a striking example, consider a passage which, like those we saw above from the *Posterior Analytics* and *Topics*, applies ‘*gnôrimon*’ to the premises of a syllogism:

τὸ δ’ ἐνθύμημα συλλογισμόν, καὶ ἐξ ὀλίγων τε καὶ  
πολλάκις ἐλαττόνων ἢ ἐξ ὧν ὁ πρῶτος συλλογισμός· ἐὰν γὰρ  
ἢ τι τούτων γνώριμον, οὐδὲ δεῖ λέγειν· αὐτὸς γὰρ τοῦτο  
προστίθῃσιν ὁ ἀκροατής, οἷον ὅτι Δωριεὺς στεφανίτην ἀγῶνα  
νενίκηκεν • ἱκανὸν γὰρ εἰπεῖν ὅτι Ὀλύμπια νενίκηκεν, τὸ δ’ ὅτι  
στεφανίτης τὰ Ὀλύμπια οὐδὲ δεῖ προσθεῖναι· γινώσκουσι γὰρ πάντες.

The enthymeme is a syllogism, and is from few [premises], often from fewer than the primary syllogism. For if one of these [premises] is *gnôrimon*, there is no need to state it, for the hearer can add it himself. For example, [to prove that] Dorieus won a contest at which the prize was a crown, it is enough to say that he won at the

Olympic games. There is no need to add that the prize at the Olympic games is a crown, for *everybody knows it* (*gignôskousi pantes*). (*Rhet.* 1357a16-21)

The fact that the Olympic prize is a crown is well-known, *gnôrimon*, not in that people are exceptionally *certain* of its truth – as if it were further beyond doubt than other facts – but rather in that it is a commonplace, something to which many people have been exposed. This is a classic example of something *gnôrimon* to us: something with which we are familiar.<sup>76</sup> (Of course we may also tend to be more certain of familiar facts, but that is not the emphasis here.)

We see a closely related phenomenon in Aristotle’s use of ‘*gnôrimon*’ in the *Ethics* to refer to particular facts learned through habituation or experience – repeated exposure. Here is his famous claim about the importance of habituation for ethical knowledge:

We must begin from things *gnôrima* to us. Which is why those who are going to study the fine and just and in general politics need to have been raised in fine habits (*ethesin*). For the *that* is the starting-point (*archê to hoti*), and if this were to appear sufficiently, one will not further need the *because*. For that kind of person has or can easily grasp the starting-points... (*EN* 1095b3-6; cf. *EN* 1098b1-4)<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Compare Demosthenes’ *Olympiac* 3.23, one of the passages cited as illustrating the meaning of *gnôrimon* as “well known” in LSJ: the *logos* – that is, the speech or tale or account – that Demosthenes will offer “will be brief, and *gnôrimon* to you, for you do not need foreign examples, but homey ones (*oikeiois*), to show you how it is possible to be happy.” For a *logos* to be *gnôrimon* here too is for it to be well-known through familiarity.

<sup>77</sup> “One should not demand to know the explanation, either, in the same way in all matters: in some cases, it will suffice if the *that* has been well shown, as for example is true also of starting points. And the *that* is

We saw above that Aristotle contrasts things that become *gnôrimon* to us through habituation with things “unknown and alien (*agnôstotera kai xenikôetera*)” (*Met.* 995a1-3). The implication of the present passage is thus that by frequently exposing us to certain facts (“thats”), ethical habituation renders them less alien and strange to us, more familiar. Again the claim is not (or at least not primarily) that we become more *certain* of these facts, or get better evidence for them or more justification; the claim instead is that they are such as to be better-known to us in something like the way that familiar people or pleasures are better-known than strange ones. A well-habituated person will easily recognize *that* this is the just amount of money to give, or *that* this the fine amount of cake to eat.<sup>78</sup> Such facts are such as to afford her relative good acquaintance – not now because she has been frequently exposed to these very facts (as people have been exposed to the specific fact that the Olympic prize is a crown), but rather because she is familiar with similar facts about the same type of things (*x* was the just amount to give on this occasion, *y* was the fine amount to eat on that occasion, and so on), and can easily recognize the new facts on the basis of that familiarity. Like a pleasure or place with which one can easily become well-acquainted, such facts are *gnôrimon* to her.

Aristotle also applies ‘*gnôrimon*’ to facts one learns through repeated exposure of another kind, experience (*empeiria*):

*Phronêsis* is about the particulars, which become *gnôrima* through experience<sup>79</sup>

...[one needs to know the particulars as well as the universals because] mistakes in

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primary and a starting point. Of starting points, some are studied (*theôrountai*) by induction, some by perception, some by a sort of habituation (*ethismôî*), and others in other ways.”

<sup>78</sup> This is a prevalent interpretation of “the that”.

<sup>79</sup> τῶν καθ' ἕκαστά ἐστιν ἡ φρόνησις, ἃ γίνεται γνώριμα ἐξ ἐμπειρίας.

deliberation are either about the universal or about the particular: either *that (hoti)* all heavy water is bad, or *that* this [water] is heavy. (EN 1142a14-23, emphases mine)

Here there are close parallels with the *Posterior Analytics*' discussion of more and less *gnôrimon* facts: "the that" is a fact that will serve as a premise in deliberation (EN 1142a21-22), where deliberation is a kind of syllogizing (EN 1144a31, *de Memoria* 453a13). What does it mean for "the that" to be *gnôrimon*? We get our clue from the way it becomes *gnôrimon*: through experience, i.e. repeated exposure. Aristotle's point is once again that we are well-acquainted with a certain kind of fact on the basis of familiarity. Someone who has frequently been exposed to different kinds of water will be well-acquainted with the different types, and will therefore be good at recognizing that a particular sample is heavy or light, wholesome or foul. The fact that this water is heavy belongs to a familiar type of fact, and hence she is at epistemic ease with it, good at recognizing it – it readily affords her good acquaintance.

## **VII. Propositions as *gnôrimon* by nature**

When Aristotle says that demonstrative premises are more *gnôrimon* than the conclusions (*Apo.* 71b20-23, 72a37-b4) he clearly does *not* mean that we have been frequently exposed to the premises or similar facts and are or can easily become well-acquainted with them. Principles are more universal and further from perception, and hence less familiar, harder to access, known only to the educated. But need this mean that he is appealing to a different meaning of *gnôrimon* connected to a different notion of knowledge? That would be going too fast. For in the intervening lines Aristotle explicitly clarifies that the premises are more *gnôrimon* by nature, rather than to us (71b33–72a5, quoted above). And if the facts we learn through habituation are *gnôrimon* to us in that they afford relatively good acquaintance, so the facts we understand or have insight into as the result of arduous education should be *gnôrimon* by nature in the sense that they afford genuinely excellent acquaintance to those whose minds are in the right condition. I submit that this is exactly what Aristotle has in mind.

We get a nice example of what it is like to become genuinely well-acquainted with a fact that is *gnôrimon* by nature in a passage that, like Plato's cave allegory, contrasts our mental relation to *gnôrimon*-by-nature things before and after education:<sup>80</sup>

δεῖ μέντοι πως καταστῆναι τὴν κτῆσιν  
αὐτῆς εἰς τὸναντίον ἡμῖν τῶν ἐξ ἀρχῆς ζητήσεων. ἄρχονται  
μὲν γάρ, ὥσπερ εἶπομεν, ἀπὸ τοῦ θαυμάζειν πάντες εἰ οὕτως  
ἔχει, καθάπερ  $\leq$ περὶ $\geq$  τῶν θαυμάτων ταυτόματα [τοῖς μήπω τε-  
θεωρηκόσι τὴν αἰτίαν] ἢ περὶ τὰς τοῦ ἡλίου τροπὰς ἢ τὴν τῆς  
διαμέτρου ἀσυμμετρίαν [θαυμαστὸν γὰρ εἶναι δοκεῖ πᾶσι  $\leq$ τοῖς  
μήπω τεθεωρηκόσι τὴν αἰτίαν $\geq$  εἴ τι τῷ ἐλάχιστῳ μὴ μετρεῖται].  
δεῖ δὲ εἰς τὸναντίον καὶ τὸ ἄμεινον κατὰ τὴν παροιμίαν ἀπο-  
τελευτῆσαι, καθάπερ καὶ ἐν τούτοις ὅταν μάθωσιν· οὐθὲν γὰρ  
ἂν οὕτως θαυμάσειεν ἀνὴρ γεωμετρικὸς ὡς εἰ γένοιτο ἡ διάμετρος  
μετρητή.

The acquisition of [wisdom], however, must in a way place us in a condition opposite to what we were in at the starting-point of inquiry. Everyone begins, as we have said,

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<sup>80</sup> Although Aristotle does not here use the word '*gnôrimon*', he discusses the same contrast that he elsewhere characterizes as a contrast between what is *gnôrimon* to us and *gnôrimon* by nature, namely the contrast between the things from which scientific or philosophical inquiry starts and the things we come to grasp at the end of such inquiry. Here the latter are not the ultimate goals of inquiry, principles, but things can be demonstrated from then: universal facts which, while less *gnôrimon* by nature than the principles, are more *gnôrimon* by nature than the particular perceptibles from which learning begins.

from wondering (*thaumazein*) that things should be as they are, for example with regard to marionettes, or the solstices, or the incommensurability of the diagonal of a square; because it seems wonderful to everyone who has not yet beheld the cause that a thing should not be measurable by the smallest unit. But we must end with the contrary and (according to the proverb) the better view, as men do even in these cases when they have learned; for a geometrician would wonder at nothing so much as if the diagonal were to become measurable. (*Met.* 983a11–21, translation based on Tredennick)

*That* the diagonal is incommensurable with the side of the square is a fact.<sup>81</sup> When we have achieved *gnôsis* of such facts through education, they are no longer puzzling and strange. In other words, when we have *gnôsis* of something *gnôrimon* by nature, it *makes sense* to us, is intelligible. (Note that Aristotle is clearly not talking about gaining certainty: one can be perfectly certain that the diagonal is incommensurable, because one has it on good authority and perhaps has even seen the proof, while still finding it mystifying.)

Moreover, our account of *gnôrimon*-by-nature objects is easily extended to show why the facts that constitute or are closer to principles are so *gnôrimon* by nature. Recall the analogy with the Forms outside of Plato's cave: things *gnôrimon* by nature are such as to be deeply known, such as to provide rich and detailed knowledge of themselves, and thereby to provide the best available knowledge of the things that derive from them. Aristotle's propositional principles – axioms, hypotheses, and definitions – fit this description beautifully. They are deeply knowable facts, things that make perfect sense, that are

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<sup>81</sup> Although Aristotle's language is, as often, indifferent between objects and propositions: does he mean that we wonder about a fact, *that* the diagonal is incommensurable, or about an object, the diagonal? (Or the diagonal's incommensurability, or the complex of the diagonal and incommensurability, etc.)

internally self-explanatory, needing no illumination from outside themselves; to a mind ready to grasp them, they obscure nothing and reveal all the rich detail about themselves.

Moreover, they are more *gnôrimon* by nature than derivative facts, because just as Plato's shadows or puppets are best known by those who know the Forms, and recognize the shadows and puppets as images of these (*Republic* 520c), Aristotle's derivative facts cannot be known well through themselves, but only through the principles.<sup>82</sup> To take an example from the *Posterior Analytics*: the fact that the planets do not twinkle is less *gnôrimon* than the fact that the planets are near (an essential fact, a principle of astronomy). Why? Because the fact that the planets do not twinkle is not something you can get to know very well just by considering it on its own; to become better-acquainted with the fact, you have to see how it follows from something more fundamental about planets, namely that they are near to the earth. You get to know a derivative fact best when you see how it derives from a more fundamental one. That the planets are near, on the other hand, is a more self-revealing fact. The predicate belongs more directly to the subject, because it is part of the subject's essence: the connection does not depend on hidden further facts which would need to be appreciated before the connection between nearness and planets (the fact that the one belongs to the other) could be fully clear.

Indeed, Aristotle considers the premises of demonstration to be the elements of its conclusion (*Phys.* 195a16-19).<sup>83</sup> Thus just as being well-acquainted with the species presupposes being well-acquainted with its genus, or being well-acquainted with a line presupposes being well-acquainted with its points, being well-acquainted with the conclusion presupposes being well-acquainted with its components – the

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<sup>82</sup> Below I discuss and reject an alternative account of what it means for the principles to be more *gnôrimon*.

<sup>83</sup> For discussion see M. Malink, "Aristotle on Principles as Elements," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 53 (2017): 163-213.

principles from which it is derived. Therefore, again, the conclusions are less knowable in themselves. Aristotle makes this point explicit in a passage we saw above from *Prior Analytics*' discussion of syllogizing, using grammatical variants on *gnôrimon*: the principles are known (*gnôrizesthai*, *gnôston*) through themselves, while the derivative things are known through the principles (*APr.* 64b34-38, quoted above).

Like the *gnôrimon*-by-nature objects we surveyed above, then, *gnôrimon*-by-nature facts are prior to the facts they explain: more fundamental, and thus more knowable in themselves. A full study of the objects of the different kinds of *gnôsis* would show that *gnôrimon*-by-nature facts also have other important qualities which allow an educated mind to grasp them fully and deeply: they are clear, they are precise, and they are “truer” than the derivative facts they explain.<sup>84</sup> For all these reasons, then, Aristotle calls them the most *gnôrimon* by nature, and describes the mental power by which we grasp them as the most *gnôsis*-producing (*gnôstikos*, *APo.* 100a11).

I submit then that when Aristotle says that the principles of demonstration are *gnôrimon* by nature, he means not they are such as to ensure certainty, but instead that they are such as to be objects of genuinely good acquaintance by minds that are ready to grasp them.

I hope to have shown in this section and the previous that when Aristotle calls propositions and facts *gnôrimon*, he is appealing to the same notion of knowledge as when he applies that term to people or pleasures. To be *gnôrimon* is to afford *gnôsis*, where *gnôsis* is good acquaintance.

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<sup>84</sup> For the last claim see *De Int.* 23b15-21, and also Aristotle's claim that through *sophia* and *phronêsis*, the conditions whereby we grasp the most *gnôrimon*-by-nature facts in the theoretical and practical domains, we “do truth most” (*malista alêtheusei*) (*EN* 1139b12-18).



A final consideration in favor of this reading is that this makes the best sense of Aristotle's frequent talk of things (propositions or facts as well as people or pleasures) being more and less *gnôrimon* – his view that the property comes in degrees.

Recall Barnes' analysis of the claim that the principles of demonstration are more *gnôrimon* and more *piston* (persuasive, convincing) than the conclusions (*APo.* 71b20-23): "Since I can be more convinced that *P* than I am that *Q*, I can be said, in a reasonably intelligible sense, to know that *P* 'more' than I know that *Q*" (Barnes, *Posterior Analytics*, 102). Barnes is trying to be charitable to Aristotle ("reasonably intelligible"), for as he recognizes, talk of degrees of knowledge is mysterious, and contemporary epistemologists tend to reject it. As Dretske puts it:

Knowing that something is so, unlike being wealthy or reasonable, is not a matter of degree...[I]f a person already knows that today is Friday, there is nothing he can acquire that will make him know it better. Additional evidence will not promote him to a loftier form of knowledge – though it may make him more certain of something he already knew. You can boil water beyond its boiling point...but you are not, thereby, boiling it better...In this respect factual knowledge is absolute.<sup>85</sup>

If we take Aristotle to be talking about good acquaintance, however, we have a far more charitable interpretation. For good acquaintance clearly comes in degrees.<sup>86</sup> Therefore, plausibly, so too does the property of affording it. Clearly this is what Aristotle has in mind when he speaks of some people as

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<sup>85</sup> F. Dretske, *Knowledge and the Flow of Information*, (Cambridge MA, 1981), at 363.

<sup>86</sup> Thus Dretske in lines elided above: "When talking about people, places, and topics (*things* rather than facts), it makes sense to say that one person knows something *better than* another. He knows the city better than we do..." (ibid, 363).

more *gnôrimon* than others (we are actually better-acquainted with them), or of perceptibles as more *gnôrimon* to us than imperceptibles (they more easily afford good acquaintance to the uneducated). We have seen that we can make sense of his talk of propositions being more or less *gnôrimon* in just the same ways. That the principles of demonstration are more *gnôrimon* than the conclusions thus means not that they are more certain (a stretch in any case), but that the facts they express lend themselves to better acquaintance for the educated mind. They are more self-revealing, and there is more there to get to know.

One might object that Aristotle's talk of things being more and less *gnôrimon* does not in fact entail any view about degrees of knowledge (and therefore does not support the good-acquaintance account):

Aristotle frequently says that one thing is more *gnôrimon* than another if the first is the *cause* of the second being *gnôrimon*, and many interpreters take the talk of degrees simply to reduce to the talk of causation.<sup>87</sup> But here is the general principle to which Aristotle appeals in defending such claims:

ἕκαστον δὲ μάλιστα αὐτὸ τῶν ἄλλων καθ' ὃ καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις ὑπάρχει τὸ συνόνυμον  
(οἷον τὸ πῦρ θερμότατον· καὶ γὰρ τοῖς ἄλλοις τὸ αἴτιον τοῦτο τῆς θερμότητος).

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<sup>87</sup> “What makes [the principles of demonstration] best known by nature is that (a) they explain other things and (b) they are not explained by anything else” (Bronstein, *Knowledge and Learning*, 128); cf. J. Lesher, “The meaning of *NOUS* in the *Posterior Analytics*,” *Phronesis* 18 (1973): 44-68 at 63, McKirahan, *Principles*, 35, Angioni, “Explanation”, 310. Lesher and Angioni both appeal to *Met.* 993b24-6, cited in the main text. Bronstein finds confirmation in a passage from the *Metaphysics* which speaks of *epistêmê* and the *epistêton*, but might reasonably be taken to generalize to all *gnôsis*: “What is most of all *epistêton* are the primary things and the causes. For on account of these and from these the other things are known (*gnôrizetai*) μάλιστα δ' ἐπιστητὰ τὰ πρῶτα καὶ τὰ αἴτια (διὰ γὰρ ταῦτα καὶ ἐκ τούτων τᾶλλα γνωρίζεται...)”

For every characteristic, that thing which compared to the others has it most is the one on the basis of which the characteristic that has that name is present in other things. For example fire is hottest: for it is also the cause of heat in other things.  
(*Met.* 993b24-26)

We find a similar claim in a passage quoted in part above, where after asserting that the principles of demonstration must be more *gnôrimon* than the conclusions, Aristotle elaborates:

αἰεὶ γὰρ δι' ὃ ὑπάρχει ἕκαστον, ἐκείνῳ μᾶλλον ὑπάρχει, οἷον δι' ὃ φιλοῦμεν,  
ἐκεῖνο φίλον μᾶλλον. ὥστ' εἴπερ  
ἴσμεν διὰ τὰ πρῶτα καὶ πιστεύομεν, κάκεῖνα ἴσμεν τε καὶ πιστεύομεν μᾶλλον,  
ὅτι δι' ἐκεῖνα καὶ τὰ ὕστερα

For something always holds more of that thing on account of which it holds: for example, that thing on account of which we love is more loved. So that if we know and are convinced on account of the primary things, we must also know and be convinced of them more, because on account of them we also [know and are convinced of] the posterior things. (*APo.* 72a29-32)

Does Aristotle's "x is more *gnôrimon* than y" simply mean that x makes y *gnôrimon*? The parallels with the loved and the hot strongly suggest that it does not. The fact that fire is hotter than wood does not reduce to the fact that fire heats wood, but instead explains it; the fact that the good itself is the most loved thing does not reduce to the fact that the goodness in other things causes them to be loved, but instead explains it. In both cases something has an intrinsic property (fire is hot, the good is lovable), which gives it causal powers. We have seen above that Aristotle's discussions of things more *gnôrimon* by nature, facts or propositions as well as other things, follow the same principle. Things which are in themselves very *gnôrimon* – the ontologically prior things which are maximally self-revealing, i.e. which

all by themselves allow us to become well-acquainted with them – can *for that reason* also make us better-acquainted with things which derive from them.

There is an enormous amount more to say about Aristotle’s understanding of what it is to be more or less *gnôrimon* by nature, for facts as well as other things. A fuller study would require investigating the things he characterizes this way not just directly under those descriptions, but as the objects of the different kinds of *gnôsis*, from perception up to *sophia*; it would show that being more *gnôrimon* by nature correlates with being the object of better *gnôsis*, *gnôsis* by which we “more know”. I hope here simply to have shown that Aristotle really is committed to the idea that knowledge comes in degrees, and also that this commitment makes most sense on the view that to know something – a fact or proposition as well as a person or pleasure – is to be well-acquainted with it. This, together with all the evidence that he calls propositions or facts *gnôrimon* when they are such as to be the objects of good acquaintance to us or by nature, should show that Aristotle works not with one notion of knowledge as good acquaintance and a second, distinct notion of propositional knowledge as certainty or the like, but rather construes all knowledge as good acquaintance.

### **VIII. Clarity**

In closing, I consider a final notable feature of Aristotle’s treatment of the *gnôrimon*, one which might be taken to revive the interpretation of *gnôsis* as certainty: his association of the *gnôrimon* with the clear. I show that it instead adds further support for an account of *gnôsis* as good acquaintance.

As we saw briefly above (section III), Aristotle frequently joins ‘*gnôrimon*’ with ‘clear’ (*saphes*, *enarges*, *phaneron*, or *dêlon*). Indeed, he seems almost to treat ‘*gnôrimon*’ as synonymous with these other words,

often switching back and forth casually between them.<sup>89</sup> To give a few examples, beginning with a passage we saw above:

πέφυκε δὲ ἐκ τῶν γνωριμωτέρων ἡμῖν ἢ ὁδοῦς  
καὶ σαφεστέρων ἐπὶ τὰ σαφέστερα τῆ φύσει καὶ γνωριμώ-  
τερα· οὐ γὰρ ταῦτ' ἡμῖν τε γνώριμα καὶ ἀπλῶς, διόπερ  
ἀνάγκη τὸν τρόπον τοῦτον προάγειν ἐκ τῶν ἀσαφεστέρων μὲν  
τῆ φύσει ἡμῖν δὲ σαφεστέρων ἐπὶ τὰ σαφέστερα τῆ φύσει (20)  
καὶ γνωριμώτερα.

It is in the nature of the road [toward principles and causes] to be from what is more *gnôrimon* and clearer to us to what is clearer and more *gnôrimon* by nature; for the same things are not *gnôrimon* both to us and without qualification. For which reason it is necessary for us to progress in this way from what is less clear by nature, but clearer to us, to what is clearer and more *gnôrimon* by nature. (*Phys.* 184a16–21)

τὸ δὲ δεικνύναι τὰ φανερά διὰ τῶν ἀφανῶν οὐ δυναμένου κρίνειν ἐστὶ τὸ δι' αὐτὸ  
καὶ μὴ δι' αὐτὸ γνώριμον [ὅτι δ' ἐνδέχεται τοῦτο πάσχειν, οὐκ  
ἄδηλον· συλλογίσαιτο γὰρ ἂν τις ἐκ γενετῆς ὦν τυφλὸς περὶ χρωμάτων]...

To show the evident (*phanera*) through the unclear (*asaphôn*) is a sign of being incapable of distinguishing between what is and what is not *gnôrimon* in itself.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Bonitz lists *dêlon* and *saphes* as synonyms for *gnôrimon* (s.v. *gnôrimon*, p.159).

<sup>90</sup> τὸ δὲ δεικνύναι τὰ φανερά διὰ τῶν ἀφανῶν οὐ δυναμένου κρίνειν ἐστὶ τὸ δι' αὐτὸ καὶ μὴ δι' αὐτὸ γνώριμον.

That it is possible to undergo this is not unclear: someone blind from birth might reason (*sullogisaito*) about colors... (*Phys.* 193a4-8)

Ἐπεὶ δ' ἐκ τῶν ἀσαφῶν μὲν φανερωτέρων δὲ γίνεται  
τὸ σαφές καὶ κατὰ τὸν λόγον γνωριμώτερον, πειρατέον  
πάλιν οὕτω γ' ἐπελθεῖν περὶ αὐτῆς· οὐ γὰρ μόνον τὸ ὅτι  
δεῖ τὸν ὀριστικὸν λόγον δηλοῦν, ὥσπερ οἱ πλεῖστοι τῶν ὄρων  
λέγουσιν, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὴν αἰτίαν ἐνυπάρχειν καὶ ἐμφαίνεσθαι.

Since from things unclear [by nature] but more apparent [to us] (*asaphôn men phanerôterôn*) arises what is clear and more *gnôrimon* on the basis of *logos* (*kata ton logon*), we must try again to proceed in this way concerning the soul. For a definitional account (*logos*) should reveal not only the *that*, as do most of those stating definitions, but should also contain and make apparent (*emphainesthai*) the *because*.<sup>91</sup> (*De An.* 413a11-16)

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<sup>91</sup> There are several obscurities in this passage. The contrast between what is “unclear but more apparent” and what is “clear and more *gnôrimon* on the basis of *logos*” is confusing. We may however follow the commentators in assuming that there is an implicit “by nature” after ‘unclear,’ and an implicit “to us” after ‘apparent,’ and also taking ‘on the basis of *logos*’ to coincide with “by nature”. There is also an ambiguity about whether the things in question are accounts – those that state only facts by contrast with those that give explanations (such as, perhaps, the account Aristotle has just offered of the soul as the actuality of a living body) – or instead objects: perceptible particulars vs. intelligible universals (Hicks), the elements vs. things compounded of them (Philoponus), or the existence of things vs. their essential features (Shields, *Aristotle*). In either case, the passage shows that the things which are clear and *gnôrimon* in the superior way involve explanations rather than mere facts. (The clear, *gnôsis*-giving

Evidently the clear and the *gnôrimon* go hand in hand. Moreover, as with the *gnôrimon*, Aristotle distinguishes between what is clear by nature and clear to us. Thus an account of clarity should help to confirm or undermine our account of the *gnôrimon*. But what is clarity?

A modern reader may assume that it is just what it is for the Stoics, or Descartes: a mark of truth.<sup>92</sup> If so, then Aristotle's link between the clear and the *gnôrimon* would send us back to the view of knowledge as certainty. Given that Aristotle attributes clarity both to objects and to accounts (for example, perhaps but not decisively objects are at issue in the first passage just quoted and accounts in the last), one might suppose that his view is as follows: clear accounts provide knowledge because they are guaranteed to be true, while clear objects can be known because our beliefs about them can be certain.

I want to show that Aristotle in fact construes clarity as affording not certainty, but instead full, detailed, informed appreciation of an object or fact – that is, good acquaintance.

A full study of Aristotle's notion of clarity would take us beyond the scope of this paper. (Leshner has made a good start, although I depart from him in arguing that clarity is conduciveness to knowledge in

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account is one that affords an explanation; or the clear, *gnôsis*-affording object is the one that supplies the explanation, e.g. the essence or principle.)

<sup>92</sup> For the Stoics, kataleptic impressions, those that afford knowledge, are guaranteed to be true; a mark of this guarantee (or the guarantee itself?) is that they are “clear and distinct” (τρᾶνῆ, ἔκτυπον) (Diogenes Laertius VII.46). Descartes follows: “So I now seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true (*illud omne esse verum, quod valde clare et distincte percipio*)” (Meditation III, AT VII, 35).

general rather than to *epistêmê* in particular).<sup>93</sup> In section III above however I have already shown how we might understand Aristotle's notion of clear *objects*, by following Plato's treatment of clarity in the Cave allegory: a clear (by nature) object is one that lends itself to full and deep insight – something with which an educated mind can be very well-acquainted. It remains here to make sense of his much more frequent attribution of clarity to accounts.

When Aristotle links the *gnôrimon* and clear, as in the passages quoted at the start of this section, it is not always easy to determine whether these terms apply to objects or to accounts; if the interpretation I

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<sup>93</sup> J. Lesher, “*Saphêneia* in Aristotle: ‘Clarity’, ‘Precision’, and ‘Knowledge,’” *Apeiron* 43 (2010): 143-156. Lesher argues that “Aristotle’s pursuit of *saphêneia* reflected not just one but several objectives: clarity in thought or expression, a detailed and accurate account of the phenomena, *and* full knowledge of the elements and causes that make a thing what it is” (155, emphasis mine). The last claim is motivated by passages that identify as “clear by nature” the principles, or that label explanatory accounts as clear. I agree that clarity is valuable insofar as it yield “a detailed and accurate account of the phenomena;” I depart from Lesher only in that I think this is the whole story – we do not need to build being explanatory into the nature of clarity. True enough, at *De An.* 413a (quoted above) as in many other passages what makes an account clear is that it provides a full explanation; correspondingly, the objects Aristotle identifies as clear by nature are indeed, as Lesher says “the basic elements and causes whose identification enables us to define the essential natures of things, identify the connections that hold among their attributes, and thereby know them in the fullest and most proper sense of ‘know’ [viz. *epistasthai*]” (ibid). But I would argue that this is downstream from the more general feature of clarity: that it conduces to *gnôsis*, understood as good acquaintance. For if reality has a deep causal structure, then being well-acquainted with reality involves grasping the causes themselves, and how they explain things, and so the highest kinds of knowledge are *nous* and *epistêmê*.



develop below is correct he may sometimes be shifting between the two, since clear accounts render their subject-matters *gnôrimon*. Nonetheless we can identify a general pattern, as follows:

- (1) Clear accounts are valuable because they allow for *gnôsis*.<sup>94</sup> They provide *gnôsis* either of the facts they express, or, perhaps most often on Aristotle's usage, of the subjects they describe: for example, a clear definition gives us *gnôsis* of the *definiens*. A clear account, like Plato's Sun, enables us to know the thing it illuminates, i.e. renders that thing *gnôrimon*. Moreover:
- (2) An account is clear in virtue of being full, detailed, precise, unambiguous, and most generally *informative*.<sup>95</sup> Therefore:
- (3) The kind of knowledge a clear account enables is not certainty, but instead good acquaintance. Aristotle's association between the clear and the *gnôrimon* thus bolsters the interpretation of the *gnôrimon* as the object of good acquaintance.

We can begin with Aristotle's most explicit discussion of clarity in accounts, in the *Topics*. The context is advice about how to test one's opponents' definitions. To begin with:

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<sup>94</sup> Aristotle is not innovating here: as Leshner has shown (J. Leshner, "The meaning of *saphênia* in Plato's Divided Line," in M. McPherran ed. *Plato's Republic, A Critical Guide* (Cambridge 2010, 171-87)), from Homer onwards we find frequent connections between knowledge and clarity (see among many others *Iliad* 2.252 and 7.226, and Herodotus 2.44.1). In very broad strokes, we can say that for these writers clarity is something that enables knowledge: clear knowing is good knowing; something that is clear can for that reason be known. In particular, clear accounts (*logoi*, *legomena* – things stated) are those that conduce to knowledge (see for example Aeschylus, *Seven against Thebes* 66–68, or Plato, *Phaedo* 100a).

<sup>95</sup> Aristotle is here following Plato: see citations below.

Ἔστι δὲ τοῦ μὴ καλῶς μέρη δύο· ἓν μὲν τὸ ἀσαφεῖ  
τῆ ἔρμηνεία κεχρηῆσθαι [δεῖ γὰρ τὸν ὀριζόμενον ὡς ἐνδέχεται  
σαφεστάτη τῆ ἔρμηνεία κεχρηῆσθαι, ἐπειδὴ τοῦ γνωρίσαι  
χάριν ἀποδίδοται ὁ ὀρισμός], δεύτερον δ' εἰ ἐπὶ πλεῖον εἴρηκε (15)  
τὸν λόγον τοῦ δέοντος· πᾶν γὰρ τὸ προσκείμενον ἐν τῷ ὀρι-  
σμῷ περιέρχον. πάλιν δ' ἑκάτερον τῶν εἰρημένων εἰς πλείω  
μέρη διείληπται.

[Defining] badly comes in two parts: first is the use of unclear expression – for the framer of a definition ought to use the clearest possible expression, since the definition is given for the sake of *to gnôrisai* [having *gnôsis*].<sup>96</sup> The second is if he has spoken a longer account than needed. (*Topics* 139b12-16)

Clear definitions conduce to *gnôsis*, while obscure definitions impede it: thus clarity is or entails conduciveness to knowledge.

Now Aristotle goes on to enumerate the sources of unclarity (139b18-140a22): ambiguity,<sup>97</sup> metaphor, use of terms that are not well-established (*mê keimena*), use of terms that are worse than metaphorical in that they lack similarity to the subject-matter, failure to make clear the contrary of the thing defined, and failure to make apparent what is being defined. We can unify all these if we take it that accounts are more

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<sup>96</sup> ἐν μὲν τὸ ἀσαφεῖ τῆ ἔρμηνεία κεχρηῆσθαι (δεῖ γὰρ τὸν ὀριζόμενον ὡς ἐνδέχεται σαφεστάτη τῆ ἔρμηνεία κεχρηῆσθαι, ἐπειδὴ τοῦ γνωρίσαι χάριν ἀποδίδοται ὁ ὀρισμός).

<sup>97</sup> Using homonyms: cf. 108a18-24 and 130a2-5 (τὸ πλεοναχῶς λεγόμενον ἀσαφὲς ποιεῖ τὸ ῥηθέν, ἀποροῦντος τοῦ μέλλοντος ἐπιχειρεῖν πότερον λέγει τῶν πλεοναχῶς λεγομένων).

or less clear depending on how well they illuminate the facts they express, or their subject-matters – that is, how much they enable us to be well-acquainted with these things. Unclear accounts obscure our mental view of their objects, whether through lack of detail, confusion, or ambiguity; accounts are clear to the extent that they give a good view of their objects.

For example, although metaphors like “temperance is harmony” are unclear, they are at least clearer than claims like “the law is an image of things naturally just” (which does not count as a metaphor, presumably because it fails as such), because:

ἡ μὲν γὰρ μεταφορὰ ποιεῖ πως γνῶριμον τὸ σημαινόμενον

διὰ τὴν ὁμοιότητα...τὸ δὲ τοιοῦτον οὐ ποιεῖ γνῶριμον.

metaphor makes the signified thing *gnōrimon* in a way, on account of the similarity...while [this other way of speaking] does not make it *gnōrimon*. (*Topics* 139b34-140a11)

Metaphor is somewhat clear – less clear than straight talk but more clear than meaningless comparisons – and correspondingly it makes its object somewhat *gnōrimon*.<sup>99</sup> The reason is that through metaphor we at least learn that the subject is similar to what the metaphor expresses. That is, we learn something a bit informative about the subject; we become to some small extent better-acquainted with it than we were before. Claims like “the law is an image of things naturally just,” meanwhile, do not show us anything about their subjects at all; that is what makes them unclear.

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<sup>99</sup> Note that here clarity is a feature of the account, and being *gnōrimon* a feature of the object: Aristotle freely switches between both uses for both terms.

This is confirmed by Aristotle's comments on the clarity of his own accounts of various phenomena. When Aristotle complains as he frequently does that an account or discussion or definition is unclear, he is not suggesting that we should doubt its truth. Instead, he is saying that it is insufficiently informative about its subject-matter.<sup>100</sup>

This complaint is perhaps most obvious in a famous passage from the *Ethics*:

ἐν πάσαις γὰρ ταῖς εἰρημέναις ἔξεσι...ἔστι τις σκοπὸς πρὸς ὃν ἀποβλέπων ὁ τὸν  
λόγον ἔχων ἐπιτείνει καὶ ἀνίησιν, καὶ τις ἔστιν ὄρος τῶν μεσοτήτων,  
ἃς μεταξὺ φάμεν εἶναι τῆς ὑπερβολῆς καὶ τῆς ἐλλείψεως,  
οὔσας κατὰ τὸν ὀρθὸν λόγον. ἔστι δὲ τὸ μὲν εἰπεῖν οὕτως  
ἀληθὲς μὲν, οὐθὲν δὲ σαφές· καὶ γὰρ ἐν ταῖς ἄλλαις ἐπι-  
μελείαις, περὶ ὅσας ἔστιν ἐπιστήμη, τοῦτ' ἀληθὲς μὲν εἰπεῖν,  
ὅτι οὔτε πλείω οὔτε ἐλάττω δεῖ πονεῖν οὐδὲ ῥαθυμεῖν, ἀλλὰ  
τὰ μέσα καὶ ὡς ὁ ὀρθὸς λόγος· τοῦτο δὲ μόνον ἔχων ἄν-  
τις οὐδὲν ἄν εἰδείη πλέον, οἷον ποῖα δεῖ προσφέρεσθαι πρὸς  
τὸ σῶμα, εἴ τις εἴπειεν ὅτι ὅσα ἡ ἰατρικὴ κελεύει καὶ ὡς  
ὁ ταύτην ἔχων. διὸ δεῖ καὶ περὶ τὰς τῆς ψυχῆς ἔξεις μὴ  
μόνον ἀληθῶς εἶναι τοῦτ' εἰρημένον, ἀλλὰ καὶ διωρισμένον  
τίς ἔστιν ὁ ὀρθὸς λόγος καὶ τούτου τίς ὄρος.

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<sup>100</sup> Here Aristotle is following Plato. Socrates often requests that someone speak more clearly, or resolves to speak more clearly himself, where his complaint about the preceding words is not that they leave room for doubt, but instead that they do not give a full, detailed, deep picture – do not enable a full, detailed, deep grasp of the subject-matter. (See for example *Gorgias* 451d-e, 463d-e and 500d, *Euthyphro* 6c-d and 10a, *Laches* 196a, and many others.)

In all the states we have discussed...there is some sort of defining mark of the intermediate states, which we say are between excess and deficiency since they are in accord with the right *logos*. But *though this is true to say, it is not at all clear*.<sup>101</sup> For in the other pursuits where there is expertise (*epistêmê*), it is also true to say that we should exert ourselves or relax neither too much nor too little but the intermediate amount and in the way the right *logos* says. If someone has only this, however, they will not thereby more know (*eideiê pleon*) – for example, as regards what sorts of treatments to apply to the body, if we are told that we should apply those that medicine prescribes and in the way the one who possesses it would. That is why, with regard to the states of the soul as well, we should not only assert this much of the truth but also determine what the right *logos* is and what its defining mark. (*EN* 1138b21-34, emphases mine, translation based on Reeve)

There is no doubt about the truth of the claim that we should follow right *logos*: it is “true but not at all clear”. Lack of clarity is thus not put forth as grounds for uncertainty (indeed, plausibly “In practicing medicine we should apply to the body those treatments that medicine prescribes” is tautologous, and hence as certain as can be). The complaint is instead that the claim is not illuminating, or informative: it does not convey a full, detailed, picture of the right *logos* or of the actions it prescribes, or perhaps of the fact the claim tries to convey. It does not afford us good acquaintance with these objects.

Earlier in the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle has equated clarity with precision (*akribeia*; cf. *Topics* 111a8-10), where here too this seems to mean fullness of detail by contrast with roughness or vagueness:

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<sup>101</sup> ἔστι δὲ τὸ μὲν εἰπεῖν οὕτως ἀληθὲς μὲν, οὐθὲν δὲ σαφές.

Λέγοιτο δ' ἂν ἰκανῶς, εἰ κατὰ τὴν ὑποκειμένην ὕλην διασαφηθεῖ· τὸ γὰρ ἀκριβὲς οὐχ ὁμοίως ἐν ἅπασιν τοῖς λόγοις ἐπιζητητέον...ἀγαπητὸν οὖν περὶ τοιούτων καὶ ἐκ τοιούτων λέγοντας παχυλῶς καὶ τύπῳ τάληθες ἐνδείκνυσθαι.

The matter will be spoken adequately if it is made clear (*diasaphêtheîê*) in a way that corresponds to the underlying subject-matter; for precision (*to akribes*) is not to be found in all discussions alike... In speaking of such subjects and starting from such premises, we should then embrace presenting the truth roughly and in outline (*panchulôs kai tupôi*).<sup>102</sup> (EN 1094b11-21)

An account is clear just to the extent that it provides sufficient detail to illuminate the subject matter.

We see this echoed in various places in the corpus: an unclear account is too sketchy to be adequately informative about its subject.<sup>103</sup> In all these passages, charges of unclarity impugn not the *truth* of an account, but a different epistemic value, informativeness. For example:

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<sup>102</sup> Compare Plato's *Philebus* 61a,4 which contrasts grasping the Good clearly with grasping it in outline (*kata tina tupon*), where the latter suffices for the purpose of ranking goods: an unclear grasp may be certain enough, but lacks detail.

<sup>103</sup> For example, in a discussion of the hot and cold in *De Partibus Animalium* Aristotle makes a few brief claims about how the hot and cold solidify things, and then dismisses the topic of solidification, remarking: "But about these things it has been determined more clearly (*diôristai saphesteron*) in other works" (*PA* 649a33). The reference is to discussions in the *Meteorology* (383a26-b17 and 384b2-23), where what he offers is a *fuller* picture: details about how solidification works in the case of frozen mud by contrast with iron, for example, and details about the causes of solidification and melting. Similarly:

διὰ τῶν ἀληθῶς μὲν λεγομένων οὐ σαφῶς δὲ πειρᾶσθαι λαβεῖν καὶ τὸ ἀληθῶς  
καὶ σαφῶς, νῦν γὰρ ὁμοίως ἔχομεν ὥσπερ ἂν εἶ καὶ  
ὑγίειαν, ὅτι ἡ ἀρίστη διάθεσις τοῦ σώματος, καὶ Κορίσκος ὁ  
τῶν ἐν τῇ ἀγορᾷ μελάντατος· τί μὲν γὰρ ἐκότερον τούτων  
οὐκ ἴσμεν...

We must try from things said *truly but not clearly* to grasp things stated both truly and clearly. For right now we are in a condition just as if [we knew] that health is the best disposition of the body and that Coriscus is the darkest person in the marketplace: for [with in that state] we do not know (*ismen*) what each of these is...  
(EE 1220a16-21)

Again a statement can be unclear even if we are sure that it is true, in virtue of being too vague to render its subject well-known. If you want to become well-acquainted with *eudaimonia*, just as if you want to get to know Coriscus, you will need something more detailed and revealing.<sup>105</sup>

Although the passages just reviewed do not explicitly join the clear to the *gnôrison*, their complaints about unclear accounts line up well with Aristotle's descriptions elsewhere of accounts that fail to render

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“Parmenides ... supposes that Being is one and that there is nothing else – as we have discussed more clearly (*saphesteron*) in the *Physics*” (*Met.* 986b27-30, with reference to a fuller discussion at *Phys.* I.3).

<sup>105</sup> At EE 1217a18-21 Aristotle has given the salient example of a true but not clear statement “that happiness is the greatest and best of human goods”. Again, it is perfectly *certain* that happiness is the greatest and best of human goods; in calling that account unclear, he means that we need to fill in the details – as he does for example by saying that happiness is the greatest *practical* good (1217a40).

their subjects *gnôrimon*. Compare with the *Eudemian Ethics* passage just quoted a passage from the *Categories*:

Ἐικότως δὲ μετὰ τὰς πρώτας οὐσίας μόνα τῶν ἄλλων  
τὰ εἶδη καὶ τὰ γένη δεύτεραι οὐσίαι λέγονται· μόνα γὰρ  
δηλοῖ τὴν πρώτην οὐσίαν τῶν κατηγορουμένων· τὸν γὰρ  
τινὰ ἄνθρωπον ἐὰν ἀποδιδῶ τις τί ἐστίν, τὸ μὲν εἶδος ἢ τὸ  
γένος ἀποδιδούς οἰκειῶς ἀποδώσει,  
—καὶ γνωριμώτερον ποιήσει ἄνθρωπον ἢ ζῷον ἀποδιδούς— τῶν δ' ἄλλων ὅ τι ἂν  
ἀποδιδῶ τις, ἀλλοτριῶς ἔσται ἀποδεδωκώς, οἷον λευκὸν ἢ  
τρέχει ἢ ὀτιοῦν τῶν τοιούτων ἀποδιδούς· ὥστε εἰκότως ταῦτα  
μόνα τῶν ἄλλων οὐσίαι λέγονται.

It is reasonable then that after the primary substances, of the others only species and genus are called secondary substance. For these alone of things predicated *reveal* (*dêloi*) the primary substance. For if someone gives what a particular human is, they will give in a way that belongs (*oikeiôs*) in giving the species or genus – and will make [the particular human] more *gnôrimon* (*gnôrimôteron poiêsei*) in giving human rather than animal. But any of the others someone might give will be given in an alien way (*allotriôs*), as if for example they give ‘white’ or ‘runs’ or any such thing.<sup>107</sup> (*Cat.* 2b29-37)

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<sup>107</sup> Cf. *Cat.* 2b9-14: “For if someone gives what some primary substance is, they will give something more *gnôrimon* and more proper in giving the species rather than the genus (γνωριμώτερον καὶ οἰκειότερον ἀποδώσει τὸ εἶδος ἀποδιδούς ἢπερ τὸ γένος)...for the former is more distinctive (*idion*) of the particular human, the latter more shared.” There certainly seems to be a conflict between these



Just as “Coriscus is the darkest person in the market-place” gives us little knowledge of Coriscus, so in general accounts that predicate accidents do not make their subjects very *gnôrimon*. An account that predicates something which belongs more closely to its subject – where species belongs more closely than genus, and genus more closely than accident – more *reveals* or *clarifies* (*dêloi*) the subject, and, apparently equivalently, renders it more *gnôrimon*. Clarity is associated with the *gnôrimon* because through the fullness of detail it provides, it allows us to see what is revealing and important about things – that is, allows us to become better-acquainted with them.

Thus Aristotle’s association of clarity with the *gnôrimon* confirms the account of *gnôsis* as good acquaintance. Moving from things clear and *gnôrimon* to us toward things clear and *gnôrimon* by nature (*Phys.* 184a16-21) means progressing away from accounts that seem to illuminate their objects, and objects that seem to be illuminated, and towards accounts that truly illuminate their objects, and objects that truly are illuminated. In associating clarity with the *gnôrimon*, Aristotle is not construing knowledge as certainty, but instead saying that we get knowledge when things are revealed to us as they are – when we can be well-acquainted with them.

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passages and the claims we saw above that genus is more *gnôrimon* than species (*Topics* 141b25-34), or that the more universal is more *gnôrimon* than the more particular (*APo.* 72a1-5). This may reflect a change in Aristotle’s ontology from the *Categories*, where individuals are the primary beings, to the later works where species and forms play that role; alternately, the claim of the *Categories* passage may be that in getting well-acquainted with a particular individual it is most informative to know the things most particular to it, leaving it open that in seeking knowledge more generally – that is, in getting well-acquainted with reality – one gets most *gnôsis* from the more universal things.

## IX. Conclusion: The desire to know

If the arguments of this paper are correct, then when Aristotle says that we desire to know, what he means is that we want to be well-acquainted with the world: to have it be revealed to us, make sense to us, be well-known. We want to know all of reality, including its most fundamental elements and principles, in a way similar but superior to the way we know a familiar person.

I have argued that Aristotle's characterization of the *gnôrimon* supports this picture of knowledge. In closing, I simply submit that this is a philosophically appealing picture of what it is that we want when we want to know – and thus that Aristotle's conception of knowledge deserves serious philosophical attention.<sup>108</sup>

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