

Aldo L'Erario

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# Grasping the Essence

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Aristotle's Epistemological and  
Psychological Conception of the  
Knowledge of Essences

ALBER SYMPOSIUM



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Aldo L'Erario

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# Table of Contents

<b>Abbreviations of Titles of Aristotle’s Works</b> . . . . .	11
<b>Introduction</b> . . . . .	13
i. »Essential Knowledge« from Epistemology to Psychology . . . . .	14
ii. Possibility of Juxtaposing the <i>Posterior Analytics</i> with <i>De Anima</i> . . . . .	17
iii. Further Methodological Remarks . . . . .	22
iv. Overview of What Follows . . . . .	24
<b>1 The <i>Meno</i> Paradox and the Challenge to Essential Knowledge</b> . . . . .	33
1.1 The Origin of the Dilemma and Plato’s Solution . . . . .	36
1.2 Aristotle’s Solution: A General Sketch . . . . .	47
1.3 The Paradox in the Context of the <i>Analytics</i> . . . . .	59
1.4 »Back Again as Well«: The Structure of Inquiry . . . . .	73
1.5 Hypothesis about the »Dynamics of Knowledge« . . . . .	88
<b>2 Implications of the Role of Insight in Aristotelian Science</b> . . . . .	93
2.1 How Much of an Empiricist Was Aristotle? . . . . .	96
2.2 The Intertwining of Cause, Essence, and Existence . . . . .	107
2.3 Goat-stags, Unicorns, and the Nautilus . . . . .	124
a) At What Stage of Inquiry Is the »Proper Object of Thought« Achieved? . . . . .	126
b) What Does the Grasp of the Essence Entail? . . . . .	134
c) Conclusions . . . . .	142

## Table of Contents

2.4 Essential Knowledge and Per Se Predication . . . . .	145
2.5 The Importance of the Leap to Essential Knowledge . . . . .	157
<b>3 The Gap between Perceptual Experience and Insight . . . . .</b>	<b>163</b>
3.1 The Actualization of Perception and Its Limits . . . . .	166
a) What Kind of Alteration is Perception? . . . . .	168
b) How Does Aristotelian Perception Work? . . . . .	172
c) What Is the Scope of Aristotle's Perceptual Realism? . . . . .	180
3.2 The Nature of Complex Perceptual Objects . . . . .	185
3.3 What Does φαντασία Add to Perception? . . . . .	196
3.4 The Peculiarities of νοῦς and Its Objects . . . . .	205
3.5 The Distinction between φαντασία and νοῦς . . . . .	220
<b>4 The Metaphysical Foundation of Essential Knowledge . . . . .</b>	<b>237</b>
4.1 The Concept of Form Applied to Essential Knowledge . . . . .	239
4.2 Achieving νοῦς: ἐπίδοσις as Key Cognitive Actualization . . . . .	248
4.3 Understanding νοῦς as a Form »Taking Place« in the Soul . . . . .	262
4.4 What Does It Mean to Be Affected by Intelligible Objects? . . . . .	276
4.5 The Priority of Actuality as Foundational Principle . . . . .	286
<b>Conclusion . . . . .</b>	<b>301</b>
i. Summary of the Argument . . . . .	301
ii. The Foundation of Theory of Knowledge on Metaphysics . . . . .	304
iii. Limits of the Present Inquiry and Further Developments . . . . .	307
iv. Perspectives on Potential Theoretical Applications . . . . .	310



<b>Bibliography</b> . . . . .	313
Ancient Works . . . . .	313
Modern Works . . . . .	316



## Abbreviations of Titles of Aristotle's Works

<i>APo</i>	<i>Posterior Analytics</i>
<i>APr</i>	<i>Prior Analytics</i>
<i>DA</i>	<i>De Anima</i>
<i>De Int</i>	<i>De Interpretatione</i>
<i>De Mem</i>	<i>De Memoria</i>
<i>EN</i>	<i>Nicomachean Ethics</i>
<i>GC</i>	<i>De Generatione et Corruptione</i>
<i>Met</i>	<i>Metaphysics</i>
<i>Phys</i>	<i>Physics</i>
<i>Top</i>	<i>Topics</i>



# Introduction

Throughout his philosophical work, Aristotle sought ways to guarantee the possibility of a firm knowledge of the world, famously arguing that we can discover the essences of things. Indeed, it could be said that the possibility to grasp an object »as it is« in its very nature, is the central pillar of his theory of knowledge. At the same time, there is evidence that he acknowledged the limits of our subjective perspective, which is conditioned by perceptual appearances and does not enjoy a direct relation to the essences of objects. Moreover, he admitted that we have no immediate access to the truth as »it is difficult to know whether you know something or not«.<sup>1</sup> It is thus legitimate to question how he thought that we can single out essences amidst the phenomena of experience.

The tension in the Stagirite's philosophical attitude has sparked very different interpretations of his gnoseological essentialism. In the last half century, though, the debate has been particularly vibrant as commentators generally shifted from stressing the apparent infallibility of the grasp of the essence to emphasizing that the achievement of said grasp is a complex, empirically driven, and fallible endeavor. The aim of the present volume is to explain Aristotle's faith in the knowledge of the essence in a way that accommodates both these aspects, showing how they can stand together.

In pursuing this goal, I will strive to determine how he characterizes the grasp of the essence under two perspectives, that of his model of science and that of his analysis of our cognitive powers. I will therefore consider side by side works as different in aim, scope, and time of composition as the *Posterior Analytics* and *De Anima*, which

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1 Χαλεπόν δ' ἐστὶ τὸ γινῶναι εἰ οἶδεν ἢ μή, *APo* I 9, 76a26. For the translation of the *Posterior Analytics*, I am using Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, Translated with a Commentary by Jonathan Barnes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993<sup>2</sup>, reprint 2002). For the Greek text I am basing myself on Ross' edition: *Aristotle's Prior and Posterior Analytics*, a Revised Text with Introduction and Commentary by W. D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949, corrected reprint 1957).

are seldom studied together. While such a methodological choice is delicate, I believe it to hold the key to a refreshed understanding of the issues that Aristotle had to overcome to shape his theory as well as of what the grasp of the essence entails according to him. I hope thus to show that the Stagirite's psychology consistently mirrors his epistemology and that both appear to build upon common intuitions.

## i. »Essential Knowledge« from Epistemology to Psychology

The attempt to analyze how Aristotle characterizes the grasp of the essence in such different contexts as epistemology and, so to say, »cognitive science«<sup>2</sup> is clearly at risk of being too general. It is important, then, to justify this choice and to establish a clear perimeter for the present inquiry. I would like to start by defining what I mean with »grasp of the essence«, outlining the main philosophical problem that said grasp poses and specifying why it is useful and legitimate to study it from different perspectives.

The grasp of the essence of an object is the grasp of what that object is, or, to use the general Greek phrase, of its τί ἐστίν. As such, it is perhaps more a form of *understanding* than an instance of »notional« knowledge: to grasp an essence is to understand—or to have an *insight* into—what something is. In what follows, I will be often referring to this kind of insight as »essential knowledge«. Hoping not to outrage any reader with this play on words, I intend the attribute »essential« to fulfill both an »objective« and a »subjective« function, so to speak. Indeed, as essences are at the center of Aristotelian ontology, this kind of knowledge founds and justifies

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2 Although it is hardly disputable that *De Anima* offers insight into the nature of our rational faculties, it is debated whether the work really deals with what we would call today »cognitive science« and/or »philosophy of mind«. I will return to this issue at the beginning of Chapter 3. However, there are scholars who have very recently argued that the treatise is indeed relevant for Aristotle's view of the inner workings of rationality: see, e.g., Sean Kelsey, *Mind and World in Aristotle's De Anima* (Cambridge: University Press, 2022), Chapter 1. To put it in Kelsey's own words: »among the problems being negotiated in the *De Anima* is the problem of how it is that it lies in our nature to know beings« (ibid., 15).

all other kinds of knowledge in the Aristotelian system of science. At the same time, essential knowledge is a grasp *of* the essence, but it is also a grasp which counts *essentially* and eminently as an instance of knowledge because, as we will see, it is impossible to be mistaken about it.<sup>3</sup> We envisage thus how the topic of essential knowledge is naturally at the crossroads between epistemology and philosophical psychology. In fact, since it is an intrinsically truthful grasp of what is fundamental, the grasp of the essence is pivotal as much in rational cognitive life as in the practice of science.

Now, there is a core problem that any form of »gnoseological essentialism« needs to overcome. From a purely theoretical perspective, the possibility that there may be such a thing as essential knowledge is threatened by a simple fact: that nothing in our phenomenological experience of the world conclusively entails the existence of essences. That is, in the face of perceptual evidence and within the limits of our beliefs, opinions, and judgements, it is always possible to doubt that there is a »nature« of things hidden behind phenomena. Therefore, the concepts we elaborate are always at risk of being merely refined, but ultimately subjective projections of our beliefs onto the world, and as such far from »intrinsically true«, as the grasp of the essence is supposed to be. The issue is particularly acute, of course, for those who wish to defend the theory that knowledge is won empirically and a posteriori, with no »short-cuts« given by intuition, aprioristic knowledge, innate notions, or the like. Indeed, »essential knowledge« tends to invite accounts of rationality where it is endowed with the special power to cut through the layer of empirical appearances to gain a grasp of absolute, definitive truths. Any philosophy emphasizing the primacy of empirical experience, on the other hand, tends to reject such rationalistic approaches, insofar as it argues that experience is necessary and sufficient to acquire knowledge. In its plainest and purest form, this empiricist position commits itself to explain knowledge on the sole

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3 It is, however, possible to fail to achieve it. Indeed, one cannot understand »falsely« what, e.g., a dog is. At most, one can believe mistakenly that the concept of »dog« refers to something else than a dog, e.g., a cat, or apply the wrong concept to instances of dogs. In other words, an essence E is necessarily grasped correctly because if it is not grasped correctly, it is not being grasped at all. To fail to grasp E is either to be grasping something else than E, or to be grasping nothing. See below Sections 2.3 and 3.4.

basis of phenomena, and thus remains in conflict with the very idea of essential knowledge, which it must inevitably call into question. As Jonas once observed, the confinement into the phenomenological makes »the magic circle« of skepticism inescapable.<sup>4</sup>

So much then for the theoretical point; but does it make sense, historically, to impute such preoccupations to Aristotle? It is difficult to assess how much these issues really concerned him, and some would object that they have a modern flair which would be alien to his mind. However, the Stagirite is certainly in the uncomfortable position of one who must explain how essential knowledge can be achieved starting from experience and perception; and there is much evidence of his struggle to do so. More particularly, with regard to the *structure of science*, Aristotle clearly strives to show how it is reasonable in face of empirical phenomena to adopt essences as explanatory principles, while with regard to the *account of our cognitive powers*, he finds ways to explain how it is possible for the human mind to grasp the nature of things in and beyond perceptual appearances. To be clear, in fulfilling the former task, Aristotle does not really offer a direct characterization of the grasp of the essence. He shows, though, that he really envisages a model of science in which essential knowledge plays a crucial role and is not reducible to weaker forms of cognition, such as perceptual generalization, and he attentively describes its concrete applications. In fulfilling the latter task, however, he does focus directly on the nature of essential knowledge. Yet only the joint study of both of his endeavors sheds conclusive light on his conception. In fact, as I will argue, essential knowledge is in the Aristotelian framework better understood in its application as the foundation stone of the system of science, as it is only there that one can grasp its explanatory role and its interplay with other forms of knowledge. At the same time, the Stagirite's study of the rational powers deputed to grasp the essence largely reflects his thoughts on the structure of science and of inquiry in general. It is therefore quite natural to analyze Aristotelian essential knowledge first epistemologically and then cognitively.

Indeed, it appears that the spirit of such a hybrid approach could be shared by Aristotle himself. In *DA I 2*, 402b10–16, while still

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4 Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life. Towards a Philosophical Biology* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001<sup>2</sup>), 29. Jonas refers here in particular to Hume, but his point has a general value.



introducing the study of the soul in general, he wonders whether it would be rather better to start the inquiry with a study of the parts of the soul, whether this study should in turn be preceded by the study of the activities of said parts, and whether this by the study of the object of each activity. The answer comes swiftly in *DA* II 4, 415a13–22 and is positive: one should describe the activities of the soul with reference to their proper object, since what is in actuality is prior to what is in potency, such that the objects of the soul's activities are prior to the activities deputed to handle them. And in fact, at the time of analyzing the rational part of the soul, which is designed to grasp intelligible objects, he constantly considers the properties of essences (or, as they are often called in *De Anima*, »forms«). Therefore, we will be doing no wrong to Aristotle if, to understand his theory of essential knowledge, we first study the role of essence in his theory of science.

The path that I am about to take in the present work unravels the conceptual points just mentioned. First, I will consider Aristotle's attitude towards what I have called »the problem of essential knowledge«. Then, I will proceed to carry out a study of the role of essence in the Aristotelian model of science, after which I will look for confirmation that this model is coherently mirrored in his analysis of the soul's cognitive faculties. Finally, I will show that said analysis provides an answer, through the metaphysical ideas it deploys, to the deep issues of essential knowledge. Before outlining the structure of the present inquiry in detail, however, it would be good to make some additional preliminary methodological remarks.

## ii. Possibility of Juxtaposing the *Posterior Analytics* with *De Anima*

The benefits of juxtaposing the Stagirite's work on the epistemological role of essential knowledge with his description of human cognitive powers are then hopefully clear. Little is won, however, if the treatises which one needs to analyze to do so are not just different in aim, but also philosophically divergent. In fact, the choice of approaching different Aristotelian works taking for granted that they express the same philosophical attitude can be controversial. Therefore, without any ambition of solving in so little space such

long-standing methodological disputes, I would like to acknowledge the difficulty and declare my attitude towards it. To make my point, I would like to recall very briefly the evolution of the debate in the last century, although it is well known. This excursus will allow me to better explain my decision to juxtapose the *Posterior Analytics* with *De Anima*.

Traditionally, Aristotle's philosophy was treated by commentators as a monolith, as if the Stagirite were »a man born with a golden system in his mind«. <sup>5</sup> In the twentieth century, however, the work of several scholars contributed to establish a new »genetic« paradigm, according to which the importance of studying the development of ideas *within* the Aristotelian system outweighed the benefits of conceiving of it as a unitary whole. Consequently, many came to consider that the tensions within the Stagirite's thought should not always be explained away, for sometimes they are just straightforward evidence that he changed his mind in the course of his life. The scholar most responsible for the rise of this paradigm is undoubtedly Werner Jaeger, who argued that the development of Aristotle's philosophy had to be understood as a gradual distancing from the ideas of his master Plato. <sup>6</sup> Jaeger contended that this process of »emancipation« from the old teacher was so radical that the early and late theses in the Stagirite's writings are not comparable. However, by the inauguration of the first Symposium Aristotelicum in 1957, Jaeger's position had already come thoroughly under attack. At that occasion, Sir David Ross argued that Aristotle's evolution was not as extreme as Jaeger had described it. <sup>7</sup> Despite conceding that the Stagirite had gradually shifted his philosophical attitude by

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5 The expression comes from John M. Rist, *The Mind of Aristotle: A Study in Philosophical Growth* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), xi.

6 I am of course making reference to Werner W. Jaeger, *Aristoteles, Grundlegung einer Geschichte seiner Entwicklung* (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1923). It should be noted, however, that Jaeger was not the first scholar to attempt a reconstruction of the development of the Corpus, as reported by Ross: see W. D. Ross, »The Development of Aristotle's Thought«, in *Aristotle and Plato in the Mid-Fourth Century, Papers of the Symposium Aristotelicum held at Oxford in August 1957*, eds. Ingemar Düring and G. E. L. Owen, *Studia Graeca et Latina Gothoburgensia XI* (Göteborg: Elanders Boktryckeri Aktiebolag, 1960), 2.

7 See *ibid.*, esp. 14.

distancing himself from Plato's theses,<sup>8</sup> he considered that he »did establish a general system which held the field for many centuries«. <sup>9</sup> Similarly, G. E. L. Owen and Ingemar Düring agreed that it was possible to speak of a »unity of thought« in the Corpus and even offered alternative reconstructions of its development, arguing that the Stagirite reacted harshly to Plato in the early years of his reflection, but afterwards was partially reconciled with the philosophical aims of his old master.<sup>10</sup> This latter view was to be shared, at least in broad strokes, by an increasing number of scholars and it is accepted today by many.

Yet, despite the establishment of this consensus and the continued support of many scholars, it is no secret that the »genetic paradigm« has in recent years entered a bit of a crisis. The main difficulty is the lack of enough evidence to date with certainty the various parts of the Corpus Aristotelicum and consequently also the apparent impossibility of reaching an authentic unanimity among scholars about the dynamics of its evolution—as lamented by Dorothea Frede, who concludes that any reconstruction of it is doomed to remain »a matter of speculation«. <sup>11</sup> An interesting example of these difficulties is reported by Reale, who, in his attack on the genetic paradigm, lists among others works of von Arnim, Oggioni, Gohlke, and Wundt, and comments, not without a hint of irony, that these scholars have almost exhausted the field of possible hypotheses about the genesis of the concept of πρώτη φιλοσοφία in the *Metaphysics*. <sup>12</sup> All things considered, the evolution of the debate has shown that it can be beneficial to take the issue of development with

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8 As testified in Id., *Aristotle*, with an Introduction by John L. Ackrill (London and New York: Routledge, 1995<sup>6</sup>), 16.

9 Id., »Development«, 19.

10 See G. E. L. Owen, »Logic and metaphysics in some earlier works of Aristotle«, in Düring and Id., *Aristotle and Plato*, 163–90, and Ingemar Düring, »Aristotle on Ultimate Principles from »Nature and Reality«, in Id. and Owen, *Aristotle and Plato*, 35–55. See also Id., *Aristotle in the Ancient Biographical Tradition*, *Studia Graeca et Latina Gothoburgensia V* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1957).

11 »Eine Sache von Spekulation« (Dorothea Frede, »Platon«, in *Aristoteles Handbuch. Leben – Werk – Wirkung*, herausgegeben von Christof Rapp und Klaus Corcilius [Stuttgart/Weimar: J.B. Metzler, 2011], 16).

12 See Giovanni Reale, *Il concetto di »filosofia prima« e l'unità della Metafisica di Aristotele* (Milano: Bompiani, 2008<sup>7</sup>), 3–8.

a grain of salt. In fact, Reale has perhaps a point when he suggests that efforts to reconstruct Aristotle's philosophical evolution yield the best results when they provide a general outline of the order of composition of the Corpus, but after a certain level of detail run the risk of depending too arbitrarily on the individual commentator's interpretative choices.<sup>13</sup>

These problems should not lead us to approach the Corpus with no concern whatsoever about its development. My point is certainly not that we should embrace a superficial systematicity, which is bound to remain too abstract and is at risk of doing violence to the text. I believe, instead, that it could be productive to pursue approaches which try to mediate the tensions between different Aristotelian works, while of course acknowledging them. In Irwin's words, if we follow this course »we will try to see how two allegedly inconsistent doctrines are really consistent, instead of giving up prematurely«. <sup>14</sup> Now, Irwin happens to be a supporter of a more static view of the Aristotelian system. But in fact, the approach I intend to pursue need not be opposed to the focus on development. To try to envisage unity in a philosophical system means to focus on the individuation of those theoretical threads which are at least likely to have guided its evolution. I hope that the development of my argument throughout this inquiry will convey how the topic of essential knowledge provides precisely such a thread, and how it is therefore possible to consider unitarily different parts of the Corpus dedicated to its discussion.

Now, for the purposes of my inquiry, I will refer to several Aristotelian works. For most of these, I will consider only limited passages, whose introduction will be justified and contextualized from time to time. The core of my thesis, however, rests as said on a juxtaposition of the *Posterior Analytics* with *De Anima*. Indeed, the former contains Aristotle's model of science, which includes observations about the inquiry into the essence of things, while the latter contains his model of the rational grasp of intelligible objects. Now, there can be hardly any doubt that the two treatises diverge in philosophical spirit at least to some degree. To mention just a famous example of how different their conceptual toolkits are, one

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13 See *ibid.*, XV–XVI.

14 Terence H. Irwin, *Aristotle's First Principles* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 12.

could simply point out that *De Anima* makes pivotal use of hylomorphism, while the *Posterior Analytics* appears to bid farewell to forms, in clear anti-Platonic spirit.<sup>15</sup> It is important, then, to spend at least a word on addressing whether these works have enough common ground to be comparable with each other. If we base ourselves on today's »canonical« view, they belong to two different periods of Aristotle's production: By the time of composition of the *Organon*, the Stagirite would still have been at the height of his anti-Platonic phase, which is why he would be repudiating the concept of form and the idea of metaphysics as the mistress science. *De Anima*, by contrast, appears to be a mature work and is thus likely contemporary to the most advanced parts of the *Metaphysics*.

However, as it has been pointed out by Rist,<sup>16</sup> Aristotle's speculations in the *Posterior Analytics* appear to have already undergone a first shift. Indeed, they have passed from a classification of the contents of the world as carried out in the *Categories*, probably one of the earliest treatises, to the investigation into the causes of why things are as they are. This philosophical pursuit is the same one which would reach its fulfillment in the *Metaphysics* and in the theories of hylomorphism and actuality. In other words, despite his rejection of the Platonic idea of metaphysics, the Stagirite appears in the *Posterior Analytics* to have started to inquire into the »what and why« of things and to be formulating his own metaphysical concepts. And while hylomorphism and other elements of his later metaphysical framework are still absent from the treatise, the concept of essence already plays a central role in it. In fact, the instantiated essences of things are declared to be the ultimate objects of knowledge and have arguably even more scientific importance than universals.

In this phase, Aristotle starts to make full-scale use of the famous phrase τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι to refer to the essence, a terminological choice which is to remain consistent throughout his entire later philosophical production. As it is well known, the τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι is the intelli-

15 See, e.g., *APo* I, 11, 77a5 and I 22, 83a32–33.

16 See again Rist, *The Mind of Aristotle*. Rist has done a masterful work of dating the works of the Corpus based on their inner references and comparative dates—an endeavor that Ross himself was sympathetic towards: see, e.g., Ross, »Development«, 16.

gible logical-ontological structure of an object. It is unitary while being complex, and it offers the utmost degree of determination while being universally applicable to its instances. It is captured by definitions and constitutes the middle term of any syllogistic chain which aims at displaying the essence in its explanatory function. Now, it could be argued that the evolution of this concept from this point on is coherent: essence »is what Aristotle in the *Metaphysics* understandably calls form«. <sup>17</sup> The Stagirite's »cognitive« and »epistemological« studies of essential knowledge are thus united by a common metaphysical conception which revolves around the ideas of substancehood and essentiality. Therefore, there is indeed a red thread connecting the Aristotelian model of the inquiry into the essence to the description in *De Anima* of how forms are apprehended by the soul, and it is reasonable to follow it. For *the one idea which is crucial for the aims of the present inquiry, namely, that intelligibility pivots around essential knowledge, is established in the Posterior Analytics and is from then on coherently pursued by Aristotle.*

### iii. Further Methodological Remarks

So much, then, for the decision to deal with the problem of Aristotelian essential knowledge from the joint perspective of epistemology and psychology. To complete my preliminary remarks, I would like to introduce the secondary literature I will refer to. Anyone studying Aristotle is forced to make a drastic selection of the critical studies to use. In making it, I have decided to limit my focus mostly to contemporary studies. I will now briefly provide my reasons for doing so.

As mentioned at the beginning of this Introduction, the interpretation of Aristotle's attitude towards essential knowledge has undergone a major shift in the last fifty to sixty years. While the traditional reading used to attribute to the Stagirite mild to strong forms of rationalism—and especially the belief in the possibility to »intu- it« essences—contemporary scholars prefer to emphasize his close-

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17 Rist, *The Mind of Aristotle*, 265. See in general *ibid.*, 52–58, 105–119 and 262–280.

ness to empiricism, sometimes even to quite uncompromising forms thereof. Given the vastness of Aristotelian studies, this change of perspective has been reflected in several and apparently unconnected debates revolving around this or that treatise. It is undisputable, however, that this shift is omnipresent and that thanks to it contemporary studies offer an ideal frame for the present inquiry. Indeed, what is at stake today is precisely our understanding of the nature and scope of Aristotelian essential knowledge: how it is achieved and what kind of access it grants to reality. Most of the debates that I will be addressing share this subtext at some level. Whether the discussion is about Aristotle's general attitude towards the search for the essence (Chapter 1), the nature of scientific inquiry and the role and significance of *voûç* in the *Posterior Analytics* (Chapter 2), the scope of perception compared to that of the rational part of the soul in *De Anima* (Chapter 3), or finally the Aristotelian conception of intelligibility (Chapter 4), commentators end up aligning with either »strong« or »deflationary« readings of essential knowledge. It will be my goal to mediate between these two alternatives.

The discussion has also been as lively as ever in recent decades, in which several important monographs have dealt with the topic of Aristotelian essential knowledge in various ways. Among these, the works by Charles and, even more recently, Bronstein<sup>18</sup> offer compelling reconstructions of how this issue plays out in the *Posterior Analytics*. Moreover, there has been in the last few years a renewed interest in *De Anima*, with various monographs and editions dedicated to it: among them, those by Shields, Diamond, Buchheim, and Corcilius<sup>19</sup> provide a steady reference for the present inquiry. Finally,

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18 See David Bronstein, *Aristotle on Knowledge and Learning. The Posterior Analytics*, Oxford Aristotle Studies (Oxford: University Press, 2016) and David Charles, *Aristotle on Meaning and Essence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000).

19 See Aristotle, *De Anima*, with an Introduction and Commentary by Christopher Shields (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2016); Eli Diamond, *Mortal Imitations of Divine Life. The Nature of the Soul in Aristotle's De Anima*, (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015), Kindle; Aristoteles, *De Anima – Über die Seele*, Griechisch-Deutsch, übersetzt mit Einleitung und Kommentar von Thomas Buchheim, mit dem griechischen Originaltext in der Oxfordausgabe von Ross, 1956 (Darmstadt: WBG, 2016); Aristoteles, *Über die Seele – De anima*, Griechisch-Deutsch, übersetzt, mit einer Einleitung und Anmerkungen von Klaus Corcilius (Hamburg: Meiner, 2017).

one should mention a very recent volume by Sean Kelsey,<sup>20</sup> which—somewhat out of step with most contemporary research—considers the significance of *De Anima* for our understanding of Aristotle's conception of intelligibility. It is self-explanatory why engaging with this work has greatly benefitted my research.

As for the ancient commentators, I have allowed only two exceptions to my self-imposed confinement to contemporary literature. Indeed, I will mention Alexander of Aphrodisias and John Philoponus because of their representativeness in the debate on the so-called »agent intellect« of *DA* III 5.<sup>21</sup> However, I will occasionally refer to them also outside of the context of that debate, in a number of situations where I have found particularly useful to do so.

#### iv. Overview of What Follows

Returning now to the outline of this volume, my thesis will be that Aristotle elaborated a theory of essential knowledge according to which the grasp of the essence is achieved through empirical experience, although being neither reducible to derivable from it. Moreover, as I will argue, he sketched a model of science in which the acquisition of knowledge proceeds empirically through perception, but perceptual experience provides no justification for essential knowledge. On the contrary, it is the utmost result of inquiry, the discovery of essential principles, which justifies itself and retroactively gives meaning to the data gathered. I will be referring to this interplay between perception and grasp of the essence as the Aristotelian »dynamics of knowledge«.

Here, some terminological clarifications are due. With »derivation« of knowledge one may mean at least two things: in a broader usage of the word, a piece of knowledge »derives« from another if, to put it generally, the former somehow *stems from* or is *developed*

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20 See again Sean Kelsey, *Mind and World*.

21 Cf. Inna Kupreeva, »Alexander von Aphrodisias«, in *Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie*, begründet von Friedrich Überweg, völlig neu bearbeitete Ausgabe, hrsg. Helmut Holzey, Band 5/1–3, *Philosophie der Kaiserzeit und der Spätantike*, hrsg. Christoph Riedweg, Christoph Horn und Dietmar Wyrwa (Basel: Schwabe, 2018), 400–403 and Matthias Perkams, »Johannes Philoponus«, *ibid.*, 2045–46.



*from* or *arises from* the latter, i.e., if the latter serves as a stepping stone to gain the former, providing necessary albeit insufficient material for its acquisition. In this sense, as I will maintain, it is certainly true that essential knowledge according to Aristotle is »derived« from perceptual experience, and that essential knowledge is achieved »through« empirical experience. However, when I state that the Stagirite held essential knowledge *not* to be derivable from weaker forms of cognition, I intend »derivation« in its more limited, logical sense, i.e., as the possibility to entail a conclusion starting from certain premises. In this sense, I argue that perceptual experience is for Aristotle *not* enough to *entail* essential knowledge. A corollary of this thesis is that the grasp of the essence according to the Stagirite *cannot be reduced* in any way to a generalization of sense-experience. In the pages that follow, I will do my best to keep the two meanings of »derivation« distinct, so as not to create confusion.

As for »justification«, I intend it in the classic sense of providing sound reasons to maintain that a given belief amounts to an instance of knowledge. Here too, a caveat is due as perception surely provides *some* justification to develop beliefs about essences. However, I will argue that in the Aristotelian framework, no amount of perception provides *sufficient* justification to affirm scientifically that a certain being has a certain essence, or that said essence is so-and-so. The same holds for any elaboration on sense-experience that does not overstep the limits of the phenomenal appearance of the world to attain conclusive truths about what things are, i.e., for those accounts based on induction and generalization that are still incapable of yielding an unwavering, essentially truthful grasp of the nature of things, a nature that applies universally and necessarily to every entity of a certain kind and defines said kind without error. It is clear that these empirical accounts, which I will be often referring to as »empirical models« based on »elaborations of perceptions«, do offer some kind of justification for holding various beliefs; but the justification they provide will clearly be insufficient to attain the kind of truthfulness and universality which Aristotle appears to expect from essential knowledge. To address this thought, thus, in what follows, I will often limit myself to stating that perceptual knowledge is not enough to justify essential knowledge.

We can consider now the fundamental thesis of this volume with these terms in mind. Again, my aim is to show that, according to Aristotle, although essential knowledge is achieved empirically, it is neither derived from perceptual experience nor (sufficiently) justified by it. Instead, the discovery of the essence involves a specific kind of rational activity which does elaborate on perception but is not limited to the scope of empirical inquiry. Once achieved, said discovery provides justification not only for itself, but also for all knowledge, shedding new light on the data of experience.

This rational activity is despite appearances neither magical nor mysterious. Indeed, Aristotle's characterization of essential knowledge aims at showing how it is *reasonable* to assume that we can grasp the essence of things. To do so, he does not rely on »special powers« of human reason; rather, the Stagirite's sketch of the »dynamics of knowledge«, according to which inquiry proceeds building »bottom up« from perception in the gradual process of learning, while justification acts »top down« through the discovery of the essence, rests ultimately on implicit metaphysical tenets which are held consistently throughout all of his work. Now, as stated earlier, the metaphysical toolkit Aristotle deploys in *De Anima* is most likely not fully shaped by the time he elaborates his model of scientific inquiry early on in his philosophical career. Yet this is of no concern. The Stagirite's goal in this latter enterprise is to formulate a structure of inquiry, not to qualify the nature of the grasp of the essence. He needs to explain *how* essential knowledge is acquired in research and *how* it is applied in scientific practice, not what the rational activity that grasps the essence of things consists of. In fulfilling this task, he does not yet need the hylomorphic framework that he will develop later. However, he does reason according to intuitions about the nature of essences that are and remain steadily at the center of his system. These enable him to qualify essential knowledge not only as foundational, but also as irreducible to other forms of cognition; and it is possible to envisage that in applying them, he is already reacting, albeit mostly implicitly, to the theoretical challenges posed to essential knowledge. Later in the development of his philosophy, though, he considered that the functioning of our rational cognitive powers should mirror faithfully his design of the »dynamics of knowledge«, and he shaped his philosophical psychology consistently with it. At the time of doing so, he had developed the most refined tools of

his metaphysics, and he applied them in full scale to his gnoseology. Through his theory of form and of actuality, he was thus able to address head-on the fundamental issues of essential knowledge.

Now, I will start in Chapter 1 by analyzing Aristotle's attitude towards what I have called above »the problem of essential knowledge«. To introduce the topic, I will consider the famous paradox that Plato elaborates in his dialogue *Meno*, which Aristotle reacts to explicitly at least in two places in the Corpus, in the *Prior* and *Posterior Analytics*, and which he arguably addresses implicitly in other places as well. Without going too deep into Platonic gnoseology (and thus without considering other related dialogues such as the *Phaedo*), I will make the circumscribed argument that the puzzle of the *Meno* and the subsequent formulation of the theory of recollection are generated by the very characteristics of essential knowledge and especially by the fact that it appears to be impossible to derive it from other forms of cognition. But if essential knowledge is irreducible to other kinds of knowledge, it apparently cannot be derived from empirical experience either. I will consider then that the Stagirite's attitude towards the puzzle shows an acute awareness of this problem. Finally, I will formulate as a working hypothesis that Aristotle's positive solution to it was to elaborate the model of inquiry that I have just sketched above, according to which essential knowledge can be won through empirical experience while being, in fact, irreducible to it.

In Chapter 2, I will then proceed to confirm this hypothesis through a study of the parts of the *Posterior Analytics* which contain Aristotle's model of scientific inquiry and his observations on the nature of essential (καθ' αὐτό) predication. The contemporary debate on whether the Stagirite is a thinker nearer to rationalism or empiricism has found in in this treatise a major playground. Joining the discussion, I will argue that the epistemological theory elaborated in this work cannot be entirely reduced to either of these two positions. Indeed, while the arguments against labeling Aristotle as a rationalist, or at least as a »strong« rationalist (e.g., as an intuitionist) appear to be conclusive, it is also hard to see how the grasp of the essence could according to him be the result of a generalization on perceptions in the terms described above. In line with my working hypothesis, then, I will contend instead that the *Posterior Analytics* convey a picture in which essential knowledge is an independent, self-justi-

ficatory, and foundational form of cognition, which amounts to an intrinsically truthful grasp of the nature of things, is irreducible to other kinds of knowledge, and yet is acquired through experience. As a result, another core thesis will have been won, namely, that Aristotelian epistemology does indeed highlight a fundamental gap between perceptual experience and essential knowledge. In fact, the grasp of the essence, as Aristotle conceives of it, cannot amount to the elaboration of an empirical model projected onto phenomenal reality; it must rather be an act of insight which takes the perspective of its very object.

Passing from epistemology to psychology, I will then consider in Chapter 3 whether the description of the cognitive powers of the soul in *De Anima* mirrors this state of things or not. Once again in dialogue with the rich contemporary conversation on the nature of Aristotelian perception, imagination, and rationality, I will conclude that it indeed does. According to the Stagirite, no level of perception, however complex and organic, amounts to the grasp of an object as a determinate, essence-endowed something. Nor does imagination serve the purpose of offering a pre-theoretical grasp of objecthood and essentiality. As I will argue, it is rather the role of the rational part of the soul to fulfill this task: indeed, the ability to grasp objects in their essence (or »form«) is its *defining* characteristic. To confirm this thesis, I will explore Aristotle's remarks on the very peculiar characteristics that he attributes to the faculty of thought<sup>22</sup> as well as those on the likewise peculiar properties of its objects. This study will confirm that essential knowledge is qualitatively distinct from lower forms of cognition, although arising from them.

In Chapter 4, I will pick on this idea thematically to explore finally *why is it that* essential knowledge can arise cognitively from perceptual experience, if it is irreducible to it. More particularly, I intend to argue that it is possible to retrace in the use Aristotle makes of the categories of hylomorphism a strategy that he deploys to solve the issues intrinsic to essential knowledge. Through the study of the appropriate texts, I hope to convey that the Stagirite, despite a profound evolution in his metaphysical categories, has at the time he applies hylomorphism to his gnoseology still the model of inquiry of

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22 Meaning here what he famously refers to as the »rational part of the soul«, see Chapter 3.

the *Posterior Analytics* in mind. In fact, using the idea of how a form takes place in a substrate as an analogy, he can explain how essential knowledge is won a posteriori through empirical experience, while being neither reducible to it nor derivable from it. What is more, he is also able to explain with even more clarity why and how essential knowledge »acts back« on the very same data that had been previously gathered to achieve it, giving them meaning and exerting on them its explanatory and foundational role, thus justifying not only itself, but also all instances of authentic knowledge. Armed with this awareness, I will finally return to the decisive chapters of *De Anima* dedicated to the apprehension of the objects of thought so as to discuss how the emerging theory of essential knowledge gives some insight into Aristotle's conception of intelligibility.

It may be worth now to spend a few more words on what my final conclusions will be. As it is well known, what essential knowledge, according to the Stagirite, adds to our empirical grasp of the world is the passage from a generic acquaintance with a category of objects (e.g., having a notion that triangles are shapes with three sides) to the grasp of the nature of those same objects (e.g., knowing *what makes a triangle such and such*, that is, that a triangle is necessarily a plain figure with three straight sides and three angles). This research highlights that this »addition« is in the Aristotelian framework not just the epistemic gain won through the establishment of an »empirical model«, but amounts to a passageway from the subject's perspective of the world to a grasp of the objects of the world as they really are,<sup>23</sup> yielding non-falsifiable knowledge of necessary truths. In this sense, it is indeed an account of what makes the world intelligible according to Aristotle.

This is also the sense in which the Stagirite cannot ultimately be described as an empiricist—at least, not just any empiricist. In fact, while my first concern with respect to this topic will be to show that his theory does not fall under the description of a »basic« em-

23 Cf. Kelsey, *Mind and World*, 14: »the phenomenon which particularly wants explaining is that it is of *psuchē* to know beings. That is, the ›knowledge‹ (τὸ γινώσκειν) whose cause Aristotle has set out to identify does not consist merely in being appeared to (whether veridically or not), or in being aware that or how one is being appeared to, but also or rather and in any case crucially in being *au fait* with real beings, as they are ›in themselves‹ (καθ' αὐτά) or ›in truth‹ (τῷ ὄντι)«.

piricism, i.e., one aiming at explaining knowledge as an »elaboration (or recombination) of perceptions«, he does not fall under more refined versions of empiricism either. For example, one could argue that knowledge for Aristotle results from envisaging a net of explanations within perceptual data, and/or from imposing some sort of rational constraints on them—which could be itself an empiricist position. Now, this is in a way certainly the case, except that for Aristotle, the »rational constraints« are given by the metaphysical structure of reality itself and not by the human mind, and our »nets of explanations« in essential knowledge ultimately *coincide* with the causal links holding reality together.

The truth that is hence achieved is not the property of propositions mirroring correctly states of affairs, but the grasp of certain determinations of an object that yield (immediately) the very identity of that object. As such, this grasp simply cannot be erroneous, because the determinations it captures are the very reason why the grasped object is what it is, and also a conclusive demonstration that such an object exists (e.g., to grasp the concept of a three-sided figure with three angles *is* to grasp what a triangle is, *and* to envisage that there are such things as triangles). Therefore, in this grasp, the explanation of what an object is and the causes of its being are the same (a triangle is a triangle *precisely* because of its definition), that is, what determines the nature of an object determines also the explanation of said nature and, along with this, the grasp we have of it. Epistemic success in essential knowledge, then, is not defined by the correspondence between our models and states of affairs, but by the unity between the nature of an existent object and the grasp of said nature.

By introducing the concept of essential knowledge, deploying it in his theory of science, and exploring its cognitive implications, Aristotle addresses a state of the mind (or soul). Yet he is not entrusting some kind of internalist justification with the foundation of his theory of knowledge;<sup>24</sup> he is rather elaborating complementary theories on how essential knowledge fits in scientific inquiry, and

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24 In particular, I do not believe that Aristotle could count as an access internalist. Although, as I suspect, the distinction between internalism and externalism, at least in their simplest forms, does not fit very well in the framework of his philosophy; see note 252.