

ABSTRACT: Aristotle claims that knowledge comes from demonstration, which he understands to be syllogistic reasoning employing premises that are explanatory of the conclusion. Those premises will themselves likely be known via other demonstrations, which themselves employ explanatory premises. These demonstrations cannot continue ad infinitum, however. There must be first principles, which are “true and primitive and immediate and more familiar than and prior to and explanatory of the conclusions” (An. Post. i.2 71b21-22). Since they are immediate, they cannot be learned. Yet Aristotle rejects Platonic nativism, so he needs some naturalistic explanation as to how they come to be known. He presents his solution in a notoriously compressed chapter at the end of Posterior Analytics. Here he describes a multi-stage process that takes us from perception through to memory, experience, and ultimately to the grasping of an account that presents us with a universal and first principle. In this paper, I clarify his picture by exploiting an analogy with a similar puzzle in the context of his ethics: how do we become virtuous without already being virtuous? Aristotle’s response in both cases is to appeal to a kind of repetition, which in the ethical case he calls “habituation”. Others have noted the similarities between moral and intellectual development in passing, but to my knowledge there is only one extended treatment of the analogy, and it claims that both approaches are incoherent. I contend, to the contrary, that the repetitions described can undergird a plausible model of intellectual development, one that avoids nativism but not at the cost of mysterianism. While the account of acquisition of the first principles that I offer is strictly empiricist, it does interestingly straddle the line between internalism and externalism.