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Sketches Of The History Of Man

In Two Volumes

Home, Henry

Edinburgh, 1774

Appendix.

urn:nbn:de:gbv:45:1-697

A P P E N D I X.

IN reviewing the foregoing sketch, it occurred, that a fair analysis of Aristotle's logics, would be a valuable addition to the historical branch. A distinct and candid account of a system that for many ages governed the reasoning part of mankind, cannot but be acceptable to the public. Curiosity will be gratified, in seeing a phantom delineated, that so long fascinated the learned world; a phantom, which, like the pyramids of Egypt, or hanging gardens of Babylon, is a structure of infinite genius, but absolutely useless, unless for raising wonder. Dr Reid, professor of moral philosophy in the college of Glasgow, relished the thought; and his friendship to me prevailed on him, after much sollicitation, to undertake the laborious task. No man is better acquainted with Aristotle's writings; and, without any enthusiastic attachment, he holds that philosopher to be a first-rate genius.

The logics of Aristotle have been on the decline more than a century; and are at present relegated to schools and colleges. They have occasionally been criticised by different writers; but this is the first attempt to draw them out of their obscurity into day-light. By what follows, one will be enabled to pass a true judgement on them, and to determine, whether they ought, or ought not, to make a branch of education. The Doctor's essay, as a capital article in the progress and history of the sciences, will, I hope, be made welcome, even with the fatigue of squeezing through many thorny paths, before a proper view can be obtained of that ancient and stupendous fabric.

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It will at the same time show the hurt that Aristotle has done to the reasoning faculty, by drawing it out of its natural course into devious paths. His artificial mode of reasoning, is no less superficial than intricate. I say, superficial; for in none of his logical works, is a single truth attempted to be proved by syllogism that requires a proof: the propositions he undertakes to prove by syllogism, are all of them self-evident. Take for instance the following proposition, That man has a power of self-motion. To prove this, he assumes the following axiom, upon which indeed every one of his syllogisms are founded, viz. That whatever is true of a number of particulars joined together, holds true of every one separately; which is thus expressed in logical terms, Whatever is true of the genus, holds true of every species. Founding upon that axiom, he reasons thus: "All animals have a power of self-motion: man is an animal: *ergo*, man has a power of self-motion." Now if all animals have a power of self-motion, it requires no argument to prove, that man, an animal, has that power: and therefore, what he gives as a conclusion or consequence, is not really so; it is not *inferred* from the fundamental proposition, but is *included* in it. At the same time, the self-motive power of man, is a fact that cannot be known but from experience. I add, that the self-motive power of man, is more clearly ascertained by experience, than that of any other animal: and in attempting to prove man to be a self-motive animal, is it not absurd, to found the argument on a proposition less certain than that undertaken to be demonstrated? What is here observed, will be found applicable to the bulk, if not the whole, of his syllogisms.

It appears singular, that Aristotle himself never attempts to apply his syllogistic mode of reasoning, to any subject handled by him: on ethics, on rhetoric, and on poetry, he argues like a rational being, without once putting in practice any of his own rules.

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But how is it possible, that a man of his capacity could long remain ignorant, how insufficient a syllogism is for discovering any latent truth? He certainly intended his system of logics, chiefly, if not solely, for disputation: and if such was his purpose, he has been wonderfully successful; for nothing can be better contrived than that system, for wrangling and disputing without end. He indeed in a manner professes this to be his aim, in his books *De Sophisticis elenchis*.

Some ages hence, when the goodly fabric of the Romish spiritual power shall be laid low in the dust, and scarce a vestige remain, it will among antiquaries be a curious enquiry, What was the nature and extent of a tyranny, more oppressive to the minds of men, than the tyranny of ancient Rome was to their persons. During every step of the enquiry, posterity will rejoice over mental liberty, no less precious in their eyes than personal liberty. The despotism of Aristotle with respect to the faculty of reason, was no less complete, than that of the Bishop of Rome with respect to religion; and it has now become a proper subject of curiosity, to enquire into the nature and extent of that despotism, from which men are at last set happily free. One cannot peruse the following sheets, without sympathetic pain for the weakness of man with respect to his noblest faculty; but that pain will redouble his satisfaction, in now being left free to the dictates of reason and common sense.

In my reveries, I have more than once compared Aristotle's logics to a bubble made of soap-water for amusing children; a beautiful figure with splendid colours; fair on the outside, empty within. It has for more than two thousand years been the hard fate of Aristotle's followers, Ixion like, to embrace a cloud for a goddess.—But this is more than sufficient for a preface: and I had almost forgot, that I am detaining my readers from better entertainment, in listening to Dr Reid.

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