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Sketches Of The History Of Man

In Two Volumes

Home, Henry

Edinburgh, 1774

Sect. 3. On Distinctions.

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

serve to give an idea of the spirit of Ramean divisions, which were in no small reputation about two hundred years ago.

Aristotle was not ignorant of this kind of division. But he used it only as a touchstone to prove by induction the perfection of some other division, which indeed is the best use that can be made of it; when applied to the common purpose of division, it is both inelegant, and burdensome to the memory; and, after it has put one out of breath by endless subdivisions, there is still a negative term left behind, which shows that you are no nearer the end of your journey than when you began.

Until some more effectual remedy be found for the imperfection of divisions, I beg leave to propose one more simple than that of Ramus. It is this: When you meet with a division of any subject imperfectly comprehended, add to the last member an *et cetera*. That this *et cetera* makes the division complete, is undeniable; and therefore it ought to hold its place as a member, and to be always understood, whether expressed or not, until clear and positive proof be brought, that the division is complete without it. And this same *et cetera* shall be the repository of all members that shall in any future time shew a good and valid right to a property in the subject.

SECT. 3. *On Distinctions.*

Having said so much of logical divisions, we shall next make some remarks upon distinctions.

Since the philosophy of Aristotle fell into disrepute, it has been a common topic of wit and raillery, to inveigh against metaphysical distinctions. Indeed the abuse of them in the scholastic ages, seems to justify a general prejudice against them: and shallow thinkers and writers have good reason to be jealous of distinctions,



tinctions, because they make sad work when applied to their flimsy compositions. But every man of true judgement, while he condemns distinctions that have no foundation in the nature of things, must perceive, that indiscriminately to decry distinctions, is, to renounce all pretensions to just reasoning: for as false reasoning commonly proceeds from confounding things that are different, so without distinguishing such things, it is impossible to avoid error, or detect sophistry. The authority of Aquinas, or Suarez, or even of Aristotle, can neither stamp a real value upon distinctions of base metal, nor ought it to hinder the currency of those that have intrinsic value.

Some distinctions are verbal, others are real. The first kind distinguish the various meanings of a word; some of which may be proper, others metaphorical. Distinctions of this kind make a part of the grammar of a language, and are often absurd when translated into another language. Real distinctions are equally good in all languages, and suffer no hurt by translation. They distinguish the different species contained under some general notion, or the different parts contained in one whole.

Many of Aristotle's distinctions are verbal merely; and therefore more proper materials for a dictionary of the Greek language than for a philosophical treatise. At least, they ought never to have been translated into other languages, when the idiom of the language will not justify them: for this is to adulterate the language, to introduce foreign idioms into it without necessity or use, and to make it ambiguous where it was not. The distinctions in the end of the Categories of the four words *prius*, *simul*, *motus*, and *habere*, are all verbal.

The modes or species of *prius*, according to Aristotle, are five. One thing may be prior to another; first, in point of time; secondly, in point of dignity; thirdly, in point of order; and so forth. The modes of *simul* are only three. It seems this word was
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