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**Sketches Of The History Of Man**

In Two Volumes

**Home, Henry**

**Edinburgh, 1774**

Sect. 2. Of the Topics.

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SECT. 2. *Of the Topics.*

The professed design of the Topics is, to shew a method by which a man may be able to reason with probability and consistency upon every question that may occur.

Every question is either about the genus of the subject, or its specific difference, or some thing proper to it, or something accidental.

To prove that this division is complete, Aristotle reasons thus: Whatever is attributed to a subject, it must either be, that the subject can be reciprocally attributed to it, or that it cannot. If the subject and attribute can be reciprocated, the attribute either declares what the subject is, and then it is a definition; or it does not declare what the subject is, and then it is a property. If the attribute cannot be reciprocated, it must be something contained in the definition, or not. If it is contained in the definition of the subject, it must be the genus of the subject, or its specific difference; for the definition consists of these two. If it is not contained in the definition of the subject, it must be an accident.

The furniture proper to fit a man for arguing dialectically may be reduced to these four heads: 1. Probable propositions of all sorts, which may on occasion be assumed in an argument. 2. Distinctions of words which are nearly of the same signification. 3. Distinctions of things which are not so far asunder but that they may be taken for one and the same. 4. Similitudes.

The second and the five following books are taken up in enumerating the topics or heads of argument that may be used in questions about the genus, the definition, the properties, and the accidents of a thing; and occasionally he introduces the topics for  
proving

proving things to be the same, or different; and the topics for proving one thing to be better or worse than another.

In this enumeration of topics, Aristotle has shewn more the fertility of his genius, than the accuracy of method. The writers of logic seem to be of this opinion: for I know none of them that has followed him closely upon this subject. They have considered the topics of argumentation as reducible to certain axioms. For instance, when the question is about the genus of a thing, it must be determined by some axiom about genus and species; when it is about a definition, it must be determined by some axiom relating to definition, and things defined: and so of other questions. They have therefore reduced the doctrine of the topics to certain axioms or canons, and disposed these axioms in order under certain heads.

This method seems to be more commodious and elegant than that of Aristotle. Yet it must be acknowledged, that Aristotle has furnished the materials from which all the logicians have borrowed their doctrine of topics: and even Cicero, Quintilian, and other rhetorical writers, have been much indebted to the topics of Aristotle.

He was the first, as far as I know, who made an attempt of this kind: and in this he acted up to the magnanimity of his own genius, and that of ancient philosophy. Every subject of human thought had been reduced to ten categories; every thing that can be attributed to any subject, to five predicables: he attempted to reduce all the forms of reasoning to fixed rules of figure and mode, and to reduce all the topics of argumentation under certain heads; and by that means to collect as it were into one store all that can be said on one side or the other of every question, and provide a grand arsenal, from which all future combatants might be furnished with arms offensive and defensive in every cause, so as to leave no room to future generations to invent any thing new.

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