CHAP. I.

NATURE OF THE ARGUMENT.

THE notions we acquire of contrivance and design arise from comparing our observations on the works of other beings with the intentions of which we are conscious in our own undertakings. We take the highest and best of human faculties, and, exalting them in our imagination to an unlimited extent, endeavour to attain an imperfect conception of that Infinite Power which created every thing around us. In pursuing this course, it is evident that we are liable to impress upon the

notion of Deity thus shadowed out, many traces of those imperfections in our own limited faculties which are best known to those who have most deeply cultivated them. It is also evident that all those discoveries which arm human reason with new power, and all additions to our acquaintance with the material world, must from time to time render a revision of that notion necessary. The present seems to be a fit occasion for such a revision.

Many excellent and religious persons not deeply versed in what they mistakenly call "*human knowledge*," but which is in truth the interpretation of those laws that God himself has impressed on his creation, have endeavoured to discover proofs of design in a multitude of apparent adaptations of means to ends, and have represented the Deity as perpetually interfering, to alter for a time the laws he had previously ordained; thus by implication denying to him the possession

of that foresight which is the highest attribute of omnipotence. Minds of this order, insensible of the existence of that combining and generalising faculty which gives to human intellect its greatest development, and tied down by the trammels of their own peculiar pursuits, have in their mistaken zeal not perceived their own unfitness for the mighty task, and have ventured to represent the Creator of the universe as fettered by the same infirmities as those by which their own limited faculties are subjugated. To causes of this kind must in some measure be attributed an opinion which has been industriously spread, that minds highly imbued with mathematical knowledge are disqualified, by the possession of that knowledge, and by the habits of mind produced during its acquisition, from rightly appreciating the works of the Creator.

At periods and in countries in which the knowledge of the priests exceeded that of the people, science has always been held up by the

former class as an object of regard, and its crafty possessors have too frequently defiled its purity by employing their knowledge for the delusion of the people. On the other hand, at times and in countries in which the knowledge of the people has advanced beyond that of the priesthood, the ministers of the temple have too often been afraid of the advance of knowledge, and have threatened with the displeasure of the Almighty those engaged in employing the faculties he has bestowed on the study of the works he has created. At the present period, when knowledge is so universally spread that neither class is far in advance of the other,—when every subject is submitted to unbounded discussion,—when it is at length fully acknowledged that truth alone can stand unshaken by perennial attacks, and that error, though for centuries triumphant, must fall at last, and leave behind no ashes from which it may revive, the authority of names has but little weight: facts and arguments are the basis of

creeds, and convictions so arrived at are the more deeply seated, and the more enduring, because they are not the wild fancies of passion or of impulse, but the deliberate results of reason and reflection.

It is a condition of our race that we must ever wade through error in our advance towards truth; and it may even be said that in many cases we exhaust almost every variety of error before we attain the desired goal. But truths, once reached by such a course, are always most highly valued; and when, in addition to this, they have been exposed to every variety of attack which splendid talents quickened into energy by the keen perception of personal interests can suggest,—when they have revived undying from unmerited neglect; when the anathema of spiritual, and the arm of secular power have been found as impotent in suppressing, as their arguments were in refuting them, then they are indeed irresistible. Thus tried and thus triumphant in

the fiercest warfare of intellectual strife, even the temporary interests and furious passions which urged on the contest, have contributed in no small measure to establish their value, and thus to render these truths the permanent heritage of our race.

Viewed in this light, the propagation of an error, although it may be unfavourable or fatal to the temporary interest of an individual, can never be long injurious to the cause of truth. It may, at a particular time, retard its progress for a while, but it repays the transitory injury by a benefit as permanent as the duration of the truth to which it was opposed. This reasoning is offered for the purpose of proving that the toleration of the fullest discussion is most advantageous to truth. It is not offered as the advocate of or the apology for error; and whilst it is admitted that every person who wilfully puts forward as valid an argument the soundness of which he doubts, incurs a deep responsibility, it is also some

satisfaction to reflect that the delay thus occasioned to the great cause can be but small, and that those who in sincerity of heart maintain arguments which a more advanced state of knowledge shall prove to be erroneous, may yet ultimately contribute, by that very publication, to its speedier establishment.

CHAP. II.

ARGUMENT IN FAVOUR OF DESIGN FROM THE CHANGING OF LAWS IN NATURAL EVENTS.

The estimate we form of the intellectual capacity of our race, is founded on an examination of those productions which have resulted from the loftiest flights of individual genius, or from the accumulated labours of generations of men, by whose long-continued exertions a body of science has been raised up, surpassing in its extent the creative powers of any individual, and demanding for its development a length of time, to which no single life extends.

The estimate we form of the Creator of the visible world rests ultimately on the same foundation. Conscious that we each of us employ, in our own productions, *means* intended to accomplish the objects at which we aim, and tracing throughout the actions and inventions of our fellow-creatures the same intention,—judging also, of their capacity by the fit selection they make of the means by which they work, we are irresistibly led, when we contemplate the natural world, to attempt to trace each existing fact presented to our senses to some precontrived arrangement, itself perhaps the consequence of a yet more general law; and where the most powerful aids by which we can assist our limited faculties fail in enabling us to detect such connexions, we still, and not the less, believe that a more extended inquiry, or higher powers, would enable us to discover them.

The larger the number of consequences resulting from any law, and the more they are foreseen, the greater the knowledge and intel-

ligence we ascribe to the being by which it was ordained. In the earlier stages of our knowledge, we behold a multitude of distinct laws, all harmonizing to produce results which we deem beneficial to our own species: as science advances, many of these minor laws merge into some more general principles; and with its higher progress these secondary principles appear, in their turn, the mere consequences of some still more general law. Such has been the case in two of the most curious and most elaborately cultivated branches of human knowledge, the sciences of astronomy and optics. All analogy leads us to infer, and new discoveries continually direct our expectation to the idea, that the most extensive laws to which we have hitherto attained, converge to some few simple and general principles, by which the whole of the material universe is sustained, and from which its infinitely varied phenomena emerge as the necessary consequences.*

* See Note A in the Appendix.