

7.
Attempts to
apply exact
methods to
philosophy.

It may already have occurred to some of my readers to ask the question: If it is true that the critical spirit has done so much to unsettle the philosophical mind as is the case according to the view I have taken above, and if, on the other side, the scientific or exact methods have been so successful in producing definiteness and assurance, how is it that the latter methods have not been applied to philosophical subjects in the same way as they have been applied to the exploration of nature? With this question we strike upon one of the cardinal points which have been brought out in the course of the nineteenth century. For only towards the end of that period has the thinking mind awakened to a consciousness of the weakness and limitations of the scientific methods,—points which have not even partially been settled without much controversy and many abortive trials. Ever since the exact methods of research have been fully recognised in their power and fruitfulness, a tendency has set in to apply them, not only to scientific but to every kind of knowledge. This tendency is already clearly expressed in some of the writings of the great French mathematicians at the end of the eighteenth century;¹ it became very marked in the middle of the nineteenth century in Germany,² where periodicals were

¹ It was notably through Condorcet and Laplace that an exaggerated opinion as to the value and fruitfulness of the theory of probabilities in the realm of moral and social questions was spread. This was noted by John Stuart Mill, who, on his part, aimed at introducing into Economics that spirit of precision which belonged to what has been termed

in this country natural knowledge.

² I do not here refer to the illegitimate use, in quasi-philosophical writings, some of which have attained to great popularity, of such scientific terms as Matter, Force, Energy, Substance, &c., even if used by scientific authorities like Carl Vogt, Ernst Haeckel, or Wilhelm Ostwald.