

choose to place them, however violent and seemingly contradictory to their natures, is, of itself, enough to render it highly improbable that time alone should have any influence over them. All that age or decay can do seems to be included in a wasting of parts which are only dissipated, not destroyed, or in a change of sensible properties, which chemistry demonstrates to arise only from new combinations of the same ingredients. But, after all, the question is one entirely of experience: we cannot be sure, *à priori*, that the laws of nature are *immutable*; but we can ascertain, by inquiry, *whether they change or not*; and to this inquiry all experience answers in the negative. It is not, of course, intended here to deny that great operations, productive of extensive changes in the visible state of nature,—such as, for instance, those contemplated by the geologists, and embracing for their completion vast periods of time,—are constantly going on; but these are consequences and fulfilments of the laws of nature, not contradictions or exceptions to them. No theorist regards such changes as alterations in the fundamental principles of nature; he only endeavors to reconcile them, and show how they result from laws already known, and judges of the correctness of his theory by their ultimate agreement.

(33.) But the laws of nature are not only permanent, but consistent, intelligible, and discoverable with such a moderate degree of research, as is calculated rather to stimulate than to weary curiosity. If we were set down, as creatures of another world, in any existing society of mankind, and began to speculate on their actions, we should find it difficult at first to ascertain whether they were subject to any laws at all: but when, by degrees, we had found out that they did consider themselves to be so, and would then proceed to ascertain, from their conduct and its consequences, what these laws were, and in what spirit conceived; though we might not perhaps have much difficulty in discovering single rules applicable to particular cases, yet, the moment we came to generalize, and endeavor from these to ascend, step by step, and discover any steady pervading principle, the