

ty which they have successively assigned to it has been continually reduced within narrower and narrower limits, and has invariably been commensurate with the errors to which the instruments used might fairly be considered liable. The conclusion this strongly presses on us is, that it is really a quantity too small to admit of distinct measurement in the present state of our means for that purpose; and that, therefore, the distance of the stars must be a magnitude of such an order as the imagination almost shrinks from contemplating. But this increase in our scale of dimension calls for a corresponding enlargement of conception in all other respects. The same reasoning which places the stars at such immeasurable remoteness, exalts them, at the same time, into glorious bodies, similar to, and even far surpassing, our own sun, the centres perhaps of other planetary systems, or fulfilling purposes of which we can have no idea, from any analogy in what passes immediately around us.

(310.) The comparison of catalogues, published at different periods, has given occasion to many curious remarks, respecting changes both of place and brightness among the stars, to the discovery of variable ones which lose and recover their lustre periodically, and to that of the disappearance of several from the heavens so completely as to have left no vestige discernible even by powerful telescopes. In proportion as the construction of astronomical and optical instruments has gone on improving, our knowledge of the contents of the heavens has undergone a corresponding extension, and, at the same time, attained a degree of precision which could not have been anticipated in former ages. The places of all the principal stars in the northern hemisphere, and of a great many in the southern, are now known to a degree of nicety which must infallibly detect any real motions that may exist among them, and has in fact done so, in a great many instances, some of them very remarkable ones.

(311.) It is only since a comparatively recent date, however, that any great attention has been bestowed on