

CHAP. VI.

OF THE CAUSES OF THE ACTUAL RAPID ADVANCE OF
THE PHYSICAL SCIENCES COMPARED WITH THEIR
PROGRESS AT AN EARLIER PERIOD.

(383.) THERE is no more extraordinary contrast than that presented by the slow progress of the physical sciences, from the earliest ages of the world to the close of the sixteenth century and the rapid developement they have since experienced. In the former period of their history, we find only small additions to the stock of knowledge, made at long intervals of time; during which a total indifference on the part of the mass of mankind to the study of nature operated to effect an almost complete oblivion of former discoveries, or, at best, permitted them to linger on record, rather as literary curiosities, than as possessing, in themselves, any intrinsic interest and importance. A few inquiring individuals, from age to age, might perceive their value, and might feel that irrepressible thirst after knowledge which, in minds of the highest order, supplies the absence both of external stimulus and opportunity. But the total want of a right direction given to inquiry, and of a clear perception of the objects to be aimed at, and the advantages to be gained by systematic and connected research, together with the general apathy of society to speculations remote from the ordinary affairs of life, and studiously kept involved in learned mystery, effectually prevented these occasional impulses from overcoming the inertia of ignorance, and impressing any regular and steady progress on science. Its objects, indeed, were confined in a region too sublime for vulgar comprehension. An earthquake, a comet, or a fiery meteor, would now and then call the attention of the whole world, and produce from all quarters a plentiful supply of crude and fanciful conjectures on their causes; but it was never supposed that sciences could exist among common objects, have a place among mechani-