

to grasp practical issues, and always descending into infinitesimals. It is hardly to be doubted now, after the lapse of a century, that the infinitesimals of Laplace play a more important part in problems of administration and government than the ideas of Napoleon. Laplace, unlike some other great scientific thinkers, attached great value to a popular exposition of the principles of his discoveries. Descartes required a Fontenelle and Newton a Voltaire to make their ideas accessible and useful to the mass of students. Laplace was his own Fontenelle and Voltaire. "Few works," says Sir John Herschel, "have been more extensively read, or more generally appreciated, than Laplace's 'Essai philosophique sur les Probabilités,' and that on the 'Système du Monde' by the same author. It is not, perhaps, too much to say that were all the literature of Europe to perish, these two essays excepted, they would suffice to convey to the latest posterity an impression of the intellectual greatness of the age which could produce them, surpassing that afforded by all the monuments antiquity has left us. Previous to the publication of the 'Essai philosophique,' few, except professed mathematicians or persons conversant with assurances and similar commercial risks, possessed any knowledge of the principles of this calculus, or troubled themselves about its conclusions, regarding them as merely curious and perhaps not altogether harmless speculations. Thenceforward, however, apathy was speedily exchanged for a lively and increasing desire to know something of a system of reasoning which for the first time seemed to afford a handle for some kind of exact inquiry into matters no one had ever expected to see reduced to calculation, and bear-