



History of scientific ideas, Volume 2 ; Being the First Part of the Philosophy of the Inductive Sciences

William Whewell

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VOL. II.

A PHILOSOPHER was asked:—How much does smoke weigh? He answered: Subtract from the weight of the fuel the weight of the ashes, and thou hast the weight of the smoke. Thus he assumed as incontrovertible that, even in the fire, the Substance does not perish, only its Form undergoes a change. In like manner the proposition, Nothing can come of Nothing, was only another consequence of the Principle of Permanence, or rather of the Principle of the Enduring Existence of the same subject with different appearances.

KANT, Kritik d. r. Vern.

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THE PHILOSOPHY OF CHEMISTRY.

CHAPTER I.

ATTEMPTS TO CONCEIVE ELEMENTARY COMPOSITION.

WE have now to bring into view, if possible, the Ideas and General Principles which are involved in Chemistry,—the science of the composition of bodies. For in this as in other parts of human knowledge, we shall find that there are certain Ideas, deeply seated in the mind, though shaped and unfolded by external observation, which are necessary conditions of the existence of such a science. These Ideas it is, which impel man to such a knowledge of the Composition of bodies, which give meaning to facts exhibiting this composition, and universality to special truths discovered by experience. These are the Ideas of Element and of Substance.

Unlike the Idea of Polarity, of which we treated in the last Book, these Ideas have been current in men's minds from very early times, and formed the subject of some of the first speculations of philosophers. It happened however, as might have been expected, that in the first attempts they were not clearly distinguished from other notions, and were apprehended and applied in an obscure and confused manner. We cannot better exhibit the peculiar character and meaning of these Ideas than by tracing the form which they have assumed

and the efficacy which they have exerted in these successive essays. This, therefore, I shall endeavour to do, beginning with the Idea of Element.

2. That bodies are composed or made up of certain parts, elements, or principles, is a conception which has existed in men's minds from the beginning of the first attempts at speculative knowledge. The doctrine of the

Four Elements, Earth, Air, Fire and Water, of which all things in the universe were supposed to be constituted, is one of the earliest forms in which this conception was systematized; and this doctrine is stated by various authors to have existed as early as the times of the ancient Egyptians¹. The words usually employed by Greek writers to express these elements are *apxn* a principle or beginning, and

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