

modern science, the idea is not new. The search for beginnings and causes — the *motif* of the great epic of science, the *De Rerum Natura* of Lucretius, he who claims Virgil's noble line,

*Felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas*

— is as old as the spirit of enquiry, and there is scarcely any science that has not had to consider origins and developments. Yet it was only on the appearance in 1859 of Darwin's great work on organic evolution that the concept assumed its supreme position. It became almost at once the august setting for all science. In all spheres of human thought and interest, facts were now interpreted in terms of it, and conduct regulated in accordance with its supposed dictates. To such an extent, and it may be said with such slight resistance, has the principle of evolution become a condition of our thinking that, in many sciences, it is with difficulty we appreciate the position and understand the language of the leaders of thought of a century ago. It is, as it were, the consort of the observational and experimental method in science, and, like it, cannot be thought of as ceasing to have an increasing value, the growth of scientific knowledge being itself a phase of the all-embracing evolution of things.

In the paper of this evening, we are to consider the more striking evidences of development in that vast extent of time and space which is regarded as the domain of astronomy. Here as in other sciences — if we are not insisting too much on this circumstance — the idea of evolution is not new. Passing over not a few earlier and worthy attempts to account for the present order of things with and about us — our world, and those bodies the moon, the sun, the planets to which our world is "neighbor and near-bred" — we may cite the bold and harmonising hypothesis of Laplace, with which should be associated also the names of Wright and Kant, though their speculations were not known to Laplace. This Nebular Hypothesis or Theory, contemplated a vast nebula occupying a space greater than that whose limits are suggested by the orbit of the outermost planet. This nebula, through rotation, and contraction from the emission of heat, under the operation of dynamical laws, was condensed