

The grasp of large numbers, the methodical array of figures and the registration of events, would in itself be of little use were it not for a fundamental assumption which appeals to common-sense and has been confirmed by science, though it is hardly anywhere expressly stated—namely, the belief in a general order, in a recurrent regularity or a slow but continuous change and orderly development of the things and events of the world. Science, in the different aspects which we have so far passed in review, tries to give a definite expression to this general Order, to this all-pervading rule and regularity. Statistics and the practical use of them limit themselves to the bare fact that such order and regularity do exist, though the formula or reason for them may be unknown or unknowable. It may also be well to note that this belief in a general order is common to all schools of thought, be they ancient or modern, pagan or Christian, religious or scientific, optimist or pessimist. The dictum, “est modus in rebus,” is the fundamental axiom of all thought and all practice; and the statistical view of nature, which merely puts into form and figure this general axiom or truism, has accordingly been appealed to as much by those who uphold a divine order of things as by others who insist on a natural or mechanical one. In the school of Quetelet, through whose influence statistical knowledge has been so greatly furthered in the course of our century, the regular recurrence of events and the stability of large numbers has been sometimes used as the basis for a fatalistic and pessimistic view, whereas nearly a hundred years before Quetelet, statistics had been elaborated by

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Belief in
general
order.