

**THE CONTINGENCY  
OF THE LAWS OF  
NATURE**

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The contingency of the laws of nature by Emile Boutroux

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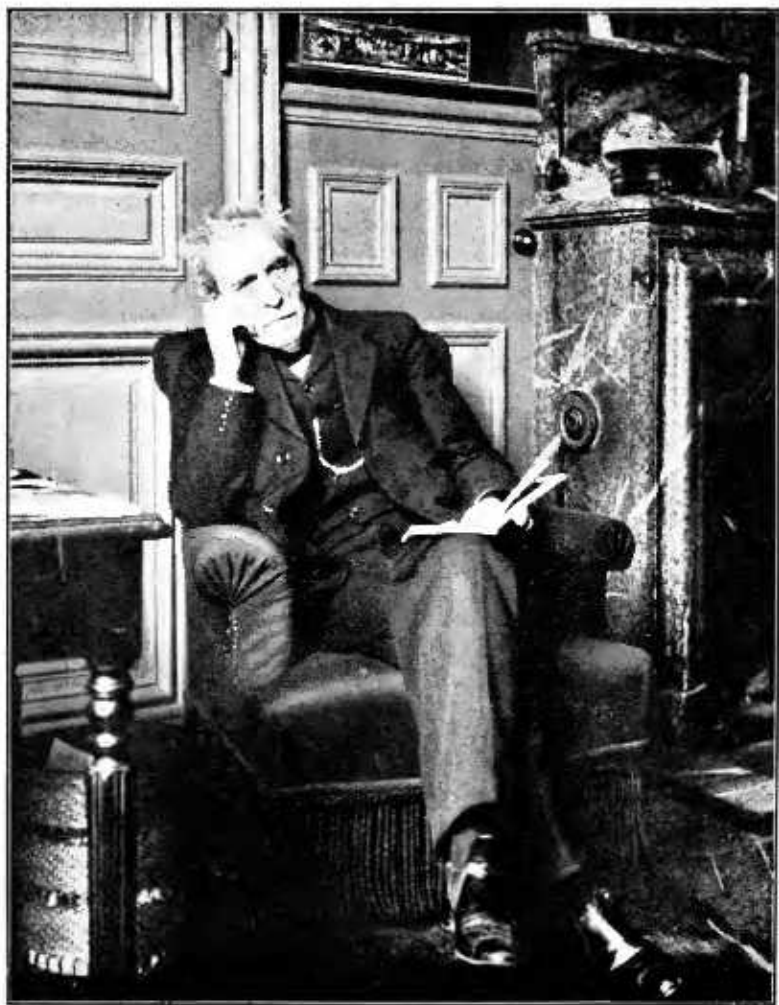
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# THE CONTINGENCY OF THE LAWS OF NATURE

BY

ÉMILE BOUTROUX

Member of the Académie Française

AUTHORISED TRANSLATION BY

FRED ROTHWELL

"Εἶναι καὶ ἐν ταύτῃ θεός."

ARISTOTLE, *De part. anim.*, i, 5.

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## PREFACE

MR FRED ROTHWELL, who has made a careful translation of several of my writings, now offers the English-speaking public a translation of the work entitled: *De la Contingence des Lois de la Nature*. May I be permitted to say, without false modesty, that when in 1874 I presented this thesis at the Sorbonne for my doctor's degree, I had no conception that it would create attention after so long an interval, all the more so as the idea I set forth at that time seemed paradoxical and very unlikely to be taken into consideration? As it happens, this idea is now attracting the attention of philosophers in various countries, and, in spite of the important development of scientific philosophy that has since come about, it is regarded by benevolent critics as a question of the day. It may, then, be interesting to state what are the two leading thoughts of this work.

The first is that philosophy should not confine itself to going over and over again the philosophical concepts offered us by the systems of our predecessors with the object of defining and combining them in more or less novel fashion: a thing that happens too frequently in the case of German philosophers. Phil-

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osophy should put itself in direct touch with the realities of nature and of life; more particularly it should be grounded on the sciences, for these are the clearest and most faithful image we have of the aspect presented to us by these realities. It has been my endeavour to replace a philosophy essentially conceptual by one that is living and is moulded on reality.

In the second place, philosophical systems appeared to me as though they might be summed up, speaking generally, in three types, which all had the same drawback: the idealist, the materialist, and the dualist or parallelist types. These three points of view have this in common: they force us to regard the laws of nature as a chain of necessity, rendering illusory all life and liberty.

Analysing the notion of natural law, as seen in the sciences themselves, I found that this law is not a first principle but rather a result; that life, feeling, and liberty are true and profound realities, whereas the relatively invariable and general forms apprehended by science are but the inadequate manifestation of these realities.

And so I have restored to man, *qua* man, to his thoughts and feelings, his will and action, that reality and affective influence over the course of things which common sense attributes to them, but which purely intellectualist or voluntarist philosophies, like those of Germany for the most part, declare to be inconceivable and illusory. Man is able to act on nature because nature itself is neither a brute force nor a lifeless

thought, but rather a veritable being, which, even now, in its own way, tends to exist and develop, to create and transcend itself. If they were actually necessary, the laws of nature would signify the immutability and rigidity of death. If they are contingent, they dignify life and constitute points of support or bases which enable us constantly to rise towards a higher life.

ÉMILE BOUTROUX.