

# Emile Boutroux's "scientific" philosophy and the value of philosophical systems

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# Outline

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## 1.a Boutroux's “scientific” philosophy

“My starting point has been science which forces itself upon us as a fact and which I accept as such” [Boutroux 1914]

But Boutroux's “scientific” philosophy was never presented as a “scientific philosophy”

## 1.b The term “scientific philosophy” in France, in the second half of XIX century

« All freethinkers, all great physiologists seek, as much as possible, to truly account for things, by leaving aside all those fruitless questions of the *absolute*, which only cause quarrels and massacres. So all such elite minds now profess scientific philosophy, that is, *positivism*, which, whatever may said, is materialistic, and abandons metaphysics to its fate as a barrier to progress.” Marius Montagnon, *Quelques mots sur la philosophie scientifique*, 1866, [Quoted and translated by A. Brenner, [2018]

## 1.c Emile Boutroux (1845-1921) a life for an original French neo-kantianism

- 1865-1868 Preparation of the thesis at the ENS under the direction of J. Lachelier and F. Ravaisson
- 1868-1870 The stay in Heidelberg 1863-1865 (encounter Helmholtz and Zeller)
- 1870-1874 Professor of Philosophy at the Lycée de Caen (renewing with Tannery brothers)
- 1874 PHD Dissertation *On the contingency of the laws of nature - On the eternal truths in Descartes*
- 1875 Lecturer at the University of Montpellier
- 1876-1887 University of Nancy (encounter Poincaré)
- 1888 Professor at the Sorbonne
- 1893-94 Sabbatical year in Freiburg (encounter Alois Riehl)
- 1898 Director of the *Thiers* Foundation
- 1910 Visiting William James in Cambridge (Massachusetts)
- 1913 Invited at the opening school at Princeton with Alois Riehl
- 1914 Third stay in Germany, visiting the University of Berlin and Jena

## 2. Boutroux's inaugural address to the First International Congress of Philosophy (1900)

- a) The separation between science and philosophy, in the first half of the 19th century
- b) The need to bring science and philosophy closer together, during the second half of the 19th century
- c) The essential mission of philosophy for the progress of science in the new 20th century.

## 2.a The separation between science and philosophy, 1800-1850

"On the one hand, there was a philosophy that, suspicious of the physical and natural sciences, tried to constitute its own domain, giving itself the task of questioning and deepening consciousness. On the other hand, science was striving to eliminate from its principles and methods any kind of philosophical element, and was willingly convinced that it was effectively doing without. If some philosophy was possible, it was estimated on this side, it could only be the study of the generalities of the various sciences, conceived as subjected to a unique method and as forming the various parts of a general plan of research. Between a philosophy foreign to the sciences and a philosophy absorbed in them, one saw no middle ground."

## 2.b The need to bring science and philosophy closer together

“But in the second half of the century, the condition of philosophy has changed more and more [...] A double need has been clearly felt: to bring philosophy closer to the sciences, which, more and more, offer to the study of reality, of life, of the soul itself, the rigor and the certainty that they did reach before in the order of abstractions and possibilities; on the other hand, to maintain the originality and the relative autonomy of the philosophy”



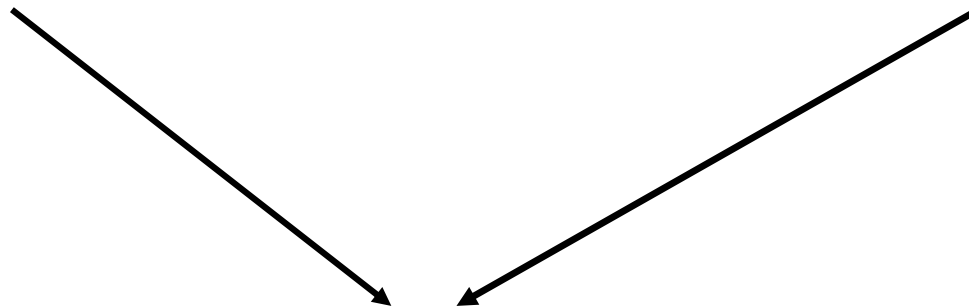
## 2.c The role of Philosophy vis-à-vis science

- "to highlight the significance and scope of the sciences" for human reason (p 506)
- to accomplish the task of "true philosophy, which can only be, in the end, the effort to understand everything and to agree everything" (508)
- to indicate how the sciences, "by their apparently independent developments, form a harmony" (p 508)

### 3. Boutroux's original conciliation of two French tradition

Auguste Comte  
1798-1857

Victor Cousin  
1792-1867



Emile Boutroux

Novelty of his reflections on history of philosophy and history of science

Novelty of his reflection of the role of philosophies vis-à-vis Science

## 3.a Novelty of Boutroux's conception of history

- Criticism of any form of historical determinism in history of science and of philosophy
  - Against the method of *Krebstgang*
- Idea that every philosophical system in history is a contingent, creative and voluntary act
- The ultimate reason: the possibility of freedom
- At all the levels of the being, for all its forms and its strata (the logical knowledge, that of the matter, that of the bodies, then of the living beings and finally of the man characterized by the consciousness) emerges a contingency that Science cannot absorb. It is a question of distinguishing an epistemological determinism of reason (regulator) used by science, from an ontological determinism which would be really at work in nature. It is a question of limiting any form of determinism in knowledge and in human action to leave room for freedom.

- It does not mean that the goal of history is *dépaysement i.e.* to provide a change of scenery, either in the form of an ethnological journey into the remote regions of the past or in the form of a psychological investigation into the minds of the geniuses who created science or philosophy .
- It does not mean that the aim of history is to provide a repertoire of examples, problems or solutions to be composed in an eclectic way for giving answers locally and pragmatically to our needs.

### 3.b Novelty of Boutroux's conception of the relations between Science and Philosophy

- Reconsidering Comte's problem of the Unity of Sciences :
- "One often hears of science as a unity. Not that one considers as achieved the perfect systematization of all the particular sciences. But one supposes that, from now on, nature has sufficiently confirmed certain principles, which itself has suggested, so that one considers as founded in law the idea of the unity [...] of these principles". *Du rapport de la philosophie à la science* (1911)
- "Our science, essentially experimental, is neither one, nor does it know if it can ever become one. Unity is, for it, not a constitutive principle, but a principle of investigation: it is a question that it puts to nature. There is not, in reality, a science, but sciences ". *Ibidem*

- "Philosophy as a contingent and autonomous development of reason, reflecting on science and on life, on their unity and on their relations has nothing but perfectly compatible with the existence and the authority of science " (1911)
- Each philosophy has an intrinsic value: it is a valid rational expression of life.
- Philosophy as a contingent and autonomous development of reason has three goals:
  - a) "to analyze the sciences, their methods, the operations by which they are made and progress, in **order to release the human element that they conceal, the living sense of their formulas, the relation of their certainty to the satisfaction of the mind**" *Ibid*
  - b) to analyze "the relation that art, religion and morals, specifically human facts," have with science, as well as "the kind of existence and the value that belong to them"
  - c) to analyze reason herself in" its relation to the notion of truth and of being"

## 4. Boutroux's neo-kantianism

- Rejection of Hegel
- Importance of the results of science
- Importance of the third *Critique* and the Regulative Ideas of Pure Reason
- Functional *a priori*
- The transcendental problem of constitution of objects of science, although considered only in an historical sense

“In modern times, Kant has seen that reason is not less original and founded to determine our judgments, *as a practical faculty than as a theoretical faculty*: but from his analytical point of view, *he sees these two faculties external to each other*. It is, it seems, this point of view that it is important to overcome. It is necessary to insist *on the artificial character of a separation of the theoretical function and the practical function belonging to reason*. For what characterizes reason, what really makes its essence and its value, is to merge in an indissoluble unity the conditions of action and those of knowledge. To say that this unity is a synthesis of theory and practice would be to employ yet another suspect metaphor, for a synthesis presupposes pre-existing units. The common sense, as Descartes said, the reason, such as the common language understands it, is a principle more profound than such a synthesis: it is the fundamental unity of the sense of the real and the sense of the intelligible. Certainly, the reason develops while being nourished both by scientific knowledge and by practical experiences, but it is, in fact, the intelligence in immediate contact with the being, the thought secretly one with the action” [1911]



## 5. Conclusion

Poincaré :

- The pure intuition of repetition granting mathematics is a intuition of acts
- Conventions as free and contingent choices (acts) determine experiences
- The problem of unity of physics is an open problem that the analysis of history can clarify (*La science et l'hypothèse* ch. X, L'état actuel de la science)
- The question of the evolution of Laws in *Dernières pensées* (1912) a direct dialogue with Boutroux

# French epistemology in the last half of 20th century

J. Vuillemin, G. Canguilhem, G.G. Granger

- The importance of dialogue between history of science and history of philosophy for understanding philosophy and science
- Philosophical systems as attempts to unify what we know and what we do at a given time
- The irredeemable plurality of these philosophical attempts at unification
- Their necessity for distinguishing science and ideology, science and mythical story-telling.
- Their necessity for understanding science as part of human culture