

CHAPTER 1

THE LOST WANDERERS OF DESCARTES AND THE AUXILIARY MOTIVE (*On the Psychology of Decision*)

I want to take a remarkable passage in the *Discourse on Method* of Descartes as the starting point of my paper. In this work the author, in addition to the rules of theoretical research, also discusses rules of practical action which are for the most part insufficiently appreciated in representations of Cartesian ethics. Among others Descartes puts forward the following principle:

My second maxim was to be as unwavering and as resolute in my actions as possible, and having once adopted opinions to adhere to them, however in themselves open to doubt, no less steadfastly than if they had been amply confirmed. In this I am following the example of travelers who, on finding themselves astray in some forest, realize that they ought not to vacillate, turning now in one direction and now in another, and still less to stop moving, but to keep always in as straight a line as possible, never for any minor reason changing direction, even though at the start it may have been chance alone which determined them in their choice of direction. If, in thus proceeding, they do not advance in the direction they expected, they will at least, in the final outcome, find themselves better located than in mid-forest. In the same way, since often, in actual living, the requirements of action allow of no delay, it is very certain that when it is not in our power to determine which opinions are truest, we ought to follow those seemingly most likely; and that in those cases in which we fail to observe any greater likelihood in some than in others, we should nevertheless give our adherence to certain of them, and thereafter (since this was our motive for adhering to them) consider them, in their bearing on action, as no longer doubtful, but very true and certain. This decision was sufficient to deliver me from all the repentings and feelings of remorse which are wont to disturb the consciences of those weak, unstable beings who in a vacillating manner abandon themselves to the acting out, as if it were good, what the next moment they are prepared to recognize as being evil (Descartes 1958, pp. 112–113).

With these words Descartes formulates his resignation in the field of practical action. He acknowledges, in principle, the necessity that we must act with insufficient insight. How does this train of thought fit into his world-view? In the second part of the *Discourse on Method* he puts forward his well-known four rules for theoretical investigation: One should assume as true only what is clearly known, dissect all problems into separate questions, arrange the problems according to their complexity, and attempt to make a complete survey of them within an investigation.

Translation of Neurath 1913a [ON 62].

Descartes was of the opinion that, in the field of theory, by forming successive series of statements that one has recognised as definitely true, one could reach a complete picture of the world. He places great confidence in this endeavour which is in sharp contrast to the resignation mentioned above. "Nothing is so difficult that one could not reach it in the end, nothing so hidden that one could not discover it." But how should the man act who has not yet attained complete insight? For this purpose Descartes formulates preliminary rules for practical action which have to be applied as long as one has not reached complete insight. For those who are of the opinion that complete insight can never be reached, these preliminary rules become definitive ones. The necessity that action must take place even if insight is incomplete already follows from the fact that 'non-action' is also an action — the result of a decision. It is precisely this that matters, that the course of events depends on our decision. Descartes does not count theoretical thinking among actions. This view could be supported if one points out that thinking can, as it were, be suspended for a time, whereas with action in the narrower sense this is not possible, since also non-action has to be considered as action, as just mentioned. Against this the objection can be made that there are a whole series of occupations which are similar to thinking. For example, we can interrupt the construction of a house for a time and we can hesitate as long as we want about continuing it. However, the most favourable time for construction may pass and the partly finished building may suffer — but the same is certainly true of thinking. Of thinking it can only be claimed that it belongs to those activities that are relatively independent of the point in time at which they are begun and of the speed with which they are carried out; in any case, the differences between thinking and action are only of degree, not kind. In the *Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes makes a sharp separation between thinking and action.

... we are to make use of this doubt only when we are engaged in contemplating the truth. For, as regards the conduct of our life, we are frequently obliged to follow opinions which are merely probable, because the opportunities for action would in most cases pass away before we could deliver ourselves from our doubts. And when, as frequently happens with two courses of action, we do not perceive the probability of the one more than the other, we must yet select one of them (Descartes 1911, pp. 219–220).

In this sense three provisional moral rules are formulated; one should adapt oneself to the usual laws, customs and religious views; act energetically even if insight is insufficient; and change oneself rather than the order of the world — a view which is, on the whole, of a stoical character.