

Rüdiger Campe

## How to use the future: the old European and the modern forms of life

This contribution addresses the change of attitudes toward the future which took place in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries in Europe (1). The emergence of probability theory was of primary importance. Only with the advent of the probability calculus taking chances developed into a consistent and ubiquitous practice of Europeans and, very soon, Americans (2). As striking as such a change of mentality, however, is, it is even more important to investigate into the intrinsic requirements and difficulties of the concept of mentalities and attitudes toward the future in the first place (3).

(1) In order to understand risk and attitudes based on probability calculation it would not be sufficient to study either the history of risk taking on the one hand or predictions on the other. Only in an abstract way, ancient oracles, physiognomy, medieval and early modern astrology, or Christian practices of probing God's will can be said to be forerunners of probability calculation since William Petty and Jakob Bernoulli. The Old European practices concerned specific sets of problems and required their own institutional settings. They were rare practices whereas risk taking on the basis of probability theory became a dominant form of life. With a certain sociological predisposition in mind one may also argue that risk taking universalized a mentality restricted before to certain professions and situations. According to this assumption, what had been before the attitude of seafaring merchants or insurance companies only now became a widespread pattern of behavior and indeed molded a new form of life. As convincing as the argument is it only confirms its own premise, i.e. the rise of a specific sociological type, the 'homo oeconomicus.'

In order to develop systematic underpinnings for such a study I propose to start with a distinction which, in the end, might again be revised and transformed by its own dynamics. I would like to distinguish between *prognostic acts* on the one hand, and a *prognostic field* on the other. Prognostic acts are predictions concerning the future tense; they are statements about what Aristotle had called single events in

the future and therefore, according to his analysis, without a truth value. How do we use statements that for intrinsic propositional reasons are neither true nor false? What I would like to call prognostic fields on the other hand are attitudes and states of mind that make people inclined to be open to the future or let them be affected by future events. Why and how is it that the future is present for and to us?

The paper will start with a brief look at the relevant section from Arnauld (and Nicole's) *L'art de penser* (1662). Famously it is here that probability theory first was allotted a place in philosophical knowledge. In the concluding sections on the 'evenemens qui dépendent de l'opinion des gens' Arnauld contrasts the calculation of chances with the story of a noble princess who, out of an erratic fear of their breaking down, never dared to enter unknown buildings without having them thoroughly inspected before. Looking at a given situation in terms of a game in which each player has specific chances of gain or loss is thus set against the foil of uncontrollable uneasiness or even the outright fear of death. It is not as a more perfect variance of oracles and predictions nor is it in terms of the risk of merchants that probability calculus entered European philosophy but as a practice in situations of affect and fear. Affects or, in Greek, *pathoi* until Descartes were thought of as situations in which man is confronted not with stable objects, but with objects moving through time and space in friendly or hostile manner. Hope and fear, uneasiness and expectation were prominent among these states of minds or *Befindlichkeiten* where objects moved according to the choreography of approaching and withdrawing in a benign or dangerous character. We may think in this context of the allegorical interludes in the baroque tragedy where personified passions dancing in the *Reyen* represent the inner conflict of the *dramatis personae*. Playing the game of chance and forming prognostic statements according to the calculus of probability intervenes in this field, or at least in its most relevant section, the prognostic field of objects and persons moving into or coming from the future.

(2) This is a key to understanding one of the most interesting documents on the adaptation of probability theory in a broader sense in the German context. For the year 1751, the Royal Academy of Arts and Sciences in Berlin asked the question of

which were the obligations of man granted the assumption that all contingent events depend upon God's will alone. The question foreclosed all metaphysical reasoning. Contingency as such was not at issue. A certain forgetting of the metaphysical structure was the outright point of departure. Indeed, one may argue as the philosopher Hans Blumenberg did that, once God is thought as the creator of the universe, in the Judaic and the Christian tradition, the question of contingency always was already decided upon. If the universe is some kind of work piece, then everything contingent in that world is under the rule and judgment of the workman. God's is what one may call the exclusive competency on contingency. Every practice of dealing with future events therefore unfolds at least to a certain degree in a field of metaphysical as-if or one may even say the forgetting of metaphysics.

Most of the ca. ten responses that had been submitted to the Academy and were printed in 1751 gave this or that version of what I would like to call the Old European answer to the question of contingency. They combine the meditation on God's comprehensive and exclusive competency for contingency with spiritual exercises evoking objects in our imagination that approach or withdraw in time and space in friendly or dangerous ways. In a word, they unfold baroque tragedies or, as Walter Benjamin pointedly called them, using the older German rendering of tragedy, mourning plays. The Germanist Jürgen Schings importantly argued that humanist and baroque mourning plays were meant to function for the audience as *consolatio tragoediae*. *Consolatio tragoediae* means exactly that, by attending the mourning play, the audience undergoes a mental training in the field of extreme prognostic uncertainties and reversals, of changing affects and sudden events. Through *consolatio tragoediae* the spectator acquires preparedness for what one can never be prepared for. This is the radically performative character of the mourning play, and, at the same time, its philosophical character according to an understanding of philosophy as a form of life (Pierre Hadot). Even as late as 1751, all responses to the Academy used this model in one or the other way – that means, all but one. The only deviant answer was composed by the mathematician Kästner, who was just at the brink of being appointed at the university of Göttingen, Germany's leading university in the sciences. Even Kästner, however, starts out with still another version of the Old

European exercise of preparing oneself for what one can never be prepared for, the contingency of the future event. That means that even Kästner at the beginning phrases his answer in a performative trajectory of the individual within the prognostic field. But then, in a so-called *Addendum*, Abraham Gottlieb Kästner reverses things: he reminds the reader not only of probability theory in general but of a development which in the early decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century had led Daniel Bernoulli to modify the calculus by building in assumptions about the specific resources of individuals to take this or that risk. By doing so, risk taking was no longer the prognostic act in a purely abstract game of chances. But now, even the resources of a given player to run a specific risk could enter into the calculation and the prognostic act. In some related remarks Kästner also talks about a quasi physiological willingness or energy of an individual to take chances. He proposes to see our psychological tendency to resume action or to give up as an anthropological measure for risk taking and the related prognostic acts. Although Kästner does not explicitly say so, it seems that he linked the mathematical model and the anthropological assumption to each other creating thus an intrinsic measure for the prognostic act, the judgment about which risk one is to take and when to give up.

With this addendum Kästner transformed the Old European protocol of preparing oneself for the event to happen so as not being surprised or overwhelmed into a modern model of risk taking, thereby also transforming the attitude toward the future from activities in the prognostic field, i.e. of our being susceptible or not for future events, into an anthropologically innervated logic of prognostic acts. The *Reyen* of Fear and Hope, Expectation and Anxiety give room to using future events according to acts of a rational and quasi-physiologically embodied measurement.

(3) However, as useful as such a historical argument about the change of mentalities is and as much as it helps to understand socio-historical behavior as much as the history of ideas in economics, aesthetics, politics etc, what we learn from the document of Kästner's award winning response is the problem and not its solution. Not only may one argue that in our present world the performative aspects of the prognostic fields again play a major role: we may think only of fostering mental

and/or material 'preparedness' after September 11. But more importantly, there are conceptual reasons for why the shift of mentalities was never as easy and simple or even possible as it seemed, and so was the related change from the prognostic field to the prognostic act. We tend to forget that in order to enter the realm of probability theory we have to play a game, the game of chances. And in order to take risks or to avoid them we expose ourselves to the fear of losing or the hope of winning. Fear and Hope in the theory of the games of chance are not the same as the Old European passions but they could not be relevant to man without any similarity to them. This, at least, is the perspective of Leibniz's take on the theory of prognostic acts within the fundamental prognostic field of playing games. The paper will conclude with a brief discussion on Leibniz in order to argue that the change of mentalities, as much as it can be seen in history, never simply started or ended in a specific moment. The way we think of a mentality towards the future always already touches on a foreclosed realm of metaphysics, according to Leibniz.