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## Born to Act

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*We are born to act.*

Michel de Montaigne<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1. It's hard not to act

This book is devoted to action: what is action, what are its modalities and virtues, its pitfalls and excesses. As Montaigne said so well: “We are born to act.” And as Pascal says, no less pertinently, in a well-known statement<sup>2</sup>, we are incapable of remaining quiet: “I have discovered that all the misfortune of men comes from one thing only, which is not knowing how to remain at rest, in a room.” In the developments on entertainment that follow this quote, Pascal develops the idea that human action is the means

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1 Montaigne, M. (ed.) (1962). *Les Essais*, Book 1, Chapter XX. In *Œuvres complètes*. Bibliothèque de La Pléiade, Paris, 87. The complete quote is: “We are born to act: *cum moriar medium solvar et inter opus*. I want us to act and to lengthen the offices of life and that death finds me planting my cabbages, but nonchalant of her and even more of my imperfect garden”; it contains the quotation from Ovid: “When I die, may I in full work leave.”

2 Pascal, B. (ed.) (1954). *Les Pensées*. In *Œuvres complètes*. Bibliothèque de La Pléiade, Paris, 1139.

they have found to forget the misery of their condition. “They [humans] do not know that it is only the hunt, and not the catch, that they seek.”<sup>3</sup> It is indeed quite difficult to remain without a project, without hope and without action. Action often imposes itself in the face of the discomfort of a state or situation. As the experiments on rats have shown, not being able to, even if only to flee from an aggression, generates very great stress<sup>4</sup>. Action is therefore in itself a remedy: “I do not claim any other fruit in acting, than to act, and do not attach to it long suits and proposals, each action is particularly his game: carry if it can!”<sup>5</sup> In summary, as Pascal said, the hunt counts more than the catch, many hunters will agree, the action has its own virtue.

What is it that drives us to act? The vertigo that seizes a person alone in their room, confronted with their condition and the inanity of everything? We know, as Stalin said, that in the end, it is death that wins, but before this term, life pushes to action. In fact, the vision of Ecclesiastes can lead to doing nothing. Indeed, why act if everything is equal? But the argument can be turned around: why not act, even if everything is vanity, we might as well be busy! Montaigne’s observation and Pascal’s lament can be better understood in this way: in the end, Man needs to be busy! Like an ant that cannot stop foraging, a bee that flies from flower to flower, a rat or a chimpanzee that scours its territory in search of food,

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3 Pascal, B. (ed.) (1954). *Les Pensées*. In *Œuvres complètes*. Bibliothèque de La Pléiade, Paris, 1141.

4 See the pioneering work in this field by Henri Laborit and Hans Selye. In particular, Henri Laborit carried out numerous experiments, often renewed since then, which have shown that rats, when subjected to an announced electric discharge and deprived of the opportunity to escape or to fight, stress and somatize. They even undertake completely inappropriate actions before sinking into prostration.

5 Montaigne, M. (ed.) (1962). *Les Essais*, Book 3, Chapter I. In *Œuvres complètes*. Bibliothèque de La Pléiade, Paris, 769.

humans are naturally active because they are alive<sup>6</sup>. In the end, “Work hard and take great pains with this”<sup>7</sup>; it is better than doing nothing, especially since, as the teachers of the past wrote on the blackboard: “He who does nothing is very close to doing badly” or “Idleness is the mother of all vices!”.

## 1.2. What is the result of the action taken?

How can we direct our action if we are part of the active? We admit that dissatisfaction guides action, because, if it is necessary to act, what is there to act on if everything is perfect? Indeed, in this case, why bother to change anything? *There is therefore the awareness at the beginning of the action of a situation that we would like to see differently in the future*<sup>8</sup>. Let us call the “problem” the difference between the current state of the world and the desired state. The difference between the two states must be reduced. But one of them is virtual, it is in the future and therefore uncertain (the future belongs to nobody!). Consequently, no one can affirm that they know with certainty the way to reach the desired state.

As a result, there are very generally several possible paths and events which will tell us what the result will be depending on the path chosen. But we will never know what would have been the result of a different choice. Indeed, we never follow more than one path. If we could follow all of

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<sup>6</sup> We are not unaware that a certain number of human beings choose the path of contemplation and that some are afflicted with melancholy, as we used to say in the olden days, but these remain a very small minority and their inaction is only a form, if not of action, at least of choice, therefore a form of decision.

<sup>7</sup> La Fontaine, J. (2021). OSR - The Fables of La Fontaine / The Ploughman and his Children. *Orchestre de la Suisse Romande (OSR)* [Online]. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sRUgau-WaFA>.

<sup>8</sup> This is even true for the actions of nihilists, whose dissatisfaction is so great that it sometimes pushes them to extreme actions.

them in our minds and know the events, it would be easy to choose the path leading to the best result. Unfortunately, this is an absurd hypothesis, because in life, events never go backwards to the starting point and allow for a second go! So, before acting, we must choose one of the paths – this choice is called a decision. The choice is not always conscious, nor personal, but when it is, it represents the decision at the beginning of the action. We will observe that the choice can be unconscious, but that the decision to act, i.e. the first step, is always conscious. If the choice is possible, we consciously choose to engage in one path rather than another. In this spirit, non-decision is also a decision and non-action is also an action.

### 1.3. To act or not to act

The decision can be defined as the mental process that leads to the initiation of an action, or, as we have just seen, a non-action. The mental process that leads to the triggering of an action is not completely elucidated and will not be treated in this book. We will simply note that after deliberation, or in an instinctive way, at a certain moment, the subject begins to implement their decision. As Hannah Arendt points out<sup>9</sup>, acting comes from the Greek *archein*, which originally means “to begin”, “to lead” and finally “to command”, which are in the Greek view that “[...] the qualities of the free man [which] testifies to an experience *in which the fact of being free and the capacity to begin something new coincide*”<sup>10</sup>.

This feeling of being free and of being able to “start doing something” is very strong and often the action weighs less on the individual than inaction would do. However, undertaking to “do something” engages the responsibility of the individual

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9 Arendt, H. (2006). *Between Past and Future*. Penguin Classics.

10 Ibid.

more than doing nothing<sup>11</sup>. This is why, in certain contexts, “doing nothing” prevails. This is often the case in administration or politics: “There is no problem that a non-decision will not eventually solve.”<sup>12</sup> The question implicitly raised by the adage of little father Queuille is that of responsibility or rather irresponsibility in certain types of hierarchical organizations. Indeed, in a hierarchy, failure slows down or even prevents progress to the next rank, and since the failure of a decision is more visible and leads to more opprobrium than the consequences of a non-decision, everything is said, there is more risk in acting than in doing nothing. In many situations, especially in administration and politics, the person who has not undertaken anything significant and has spent their time weaving in and out of pitfalls is more likely to see their career follow a peaceful course than the person who has ventured into reform. In these political–administrative contexts, removing barriers to action is a matter of changing the culture by devaluing the *status quo*, valuing initiatives, publishing and learning from failures that need to be analyzed (for more on this, see Chapter 4, section 4.4).

*Action and decision are inseparable*, we decide to act or not to act. In the first case, everything starts, the brain and the body move. In fact, the brain is already in motion, since it is the brain that makes the decision. In this book, we will not talk about the biology of decision, i.e. the way neurons transmit and process information, we refer, for example, to the works of Philippe Damier<sup>13</sup>, Thomas Boraud<sup>14</sup> and

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11 Simon already noted: “We feel greater responsibility for our action than for our inaction”. – Simon, H.A. (1990). Prediction and prescription in system modeling. *Operations Research*, 38(10).

12 Attributed to the “little father” Queuille, Henri of his first name, President of the Council under the French Fourth Republic, known for his immobilism.

13 Damier, P. (2014). *Décider en toute connaissance de soi*. Odile Jacob, Paris.

Mathias Pessiglione<sup>15</sup>. We will start from the moment when a group of neurons is potentialized on a decision, the other possibilities being inhibited. We will therefore limit ourselves to processing conscious information as perceived by the decision-maker.

#### 1.4. Synopsis

In Chapter 2, we will discuss the different types of decision-making, from “animal decision-making” to human decision-making. In Chapter 3, we will examine what happens before action, anticipation, planning and dreaming. Chapter 4 will be devoted to the decision and especially to action and to what hinders action, either from a personal point of view or in connection with the exercise of responsibilities in organizations. Chapter 5 focuses on the conduct of action and leadership. Chapter 6 is devoted to intuition, expertise and the ecology of decision-making, i.e. the role of the environment in the different ways of deciding.

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14 Boraud, T. (2015). *Matière à décision*. CNRS Éditions, Paris.

15 Pessiglione, M. (2021). *Les Vacances de Momo Sapiens : notre cerveau entre raison et déraison*. Odile Jacob, Paris.