

**DISPUTE SUR LES CONCEPTIONS DU PROCESSUS DE DÉCISION
A DISPUTE ABOUT THE CONCEPTIONS OF THE DECISION
PROCESS***

DISPUTA SULLE CONCEZIONI DEL PROCESSO DECISIONALE

**BRUNO MAGGI
UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA E UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO**

**ANDREU SOLÉ
HEC - PARIS**

Abstract

What does it mean to make a decision? Does a decision theory exist? How can we understand decision making? By using the traditional literary form of the "dispute", the authors explore the various approaches to the theoretical and empirical issue of decision making. Each of the three fictional characters represent a different way to approach the problem, each one showing, through a lively debate and dialogue, a specific point of view on what decisions are and how they can be understood. But this dispute is not just about decision making in itself. The characters also represent very different views about what an enterprise is, what rationality is, what are freedom and reality.

Keywords

Decision making process, Decision theory, Epistemology of social sciences, Views of the world, Dispute.

* This paper has been presented and discussed at the 4th Italian Organization Researchers Workshop "I processi decisionali nell'organizzazione d'impresa", at the University of Florence, February 13th and 14th, 2003. The Italian version was published in the Proceedings cd-rom of this event and, afterwards, in the electronic review *Impresa Progetto*, 2006, 2: 1-15.

Dispute sur les conceptions du processus de décision / A dispute about the conceptions of the decision process / Disputa sulle concezioni del processo decisionale / Maggi Bruno, Solé Andreu. Bologna: TAO Digital Library, 2010.

Proprietà letteraria riservata
© Copyright 2010 degli autori
Tutti i diritti riservati

ISBN: 978-88-904979-3-3



The TAO Digital Library is part of the activities of the Research Programs based on the Theory of Organizational Action proposed by Bruno Maggi, a theory of the regulation of social action that conceives organization as a process of actions and decisions. Its research approach proposes: a view on organizational change in enterprises and in work processes; an action on relationships between work and well-being; the analysis and the transformation of the social-action processes, centered on the subject; a focus on learning processes.

The contributions published by the TAO Digital Library are legally deposited and receive an ISBN code. Therefore, they are to be considered in all respects as monographs. The monographs are available online through AMS Acta, which is the institutional open archive of the University of Bologna. Their stable web addresses are indexed by the major online search engines.

TAO Digital Library welcomes disciplinary and multi- or inter-disciplinary contributions related to the theoretical framework and the activities of the TAO Research Programs:

- Innovative papers presenting theoretical or empirical analysis, selected after a double peer review process;
- Contributions of particular relevance in the field which are already published but not easily available to the scientific community.

The submitted contributions may share or not the theoretical perspective proposed by the Theory of Organizational Action, however they should refer to this theory in the discussion.

EDITORIAL STAFF

Editor: Bruno Maggi

Co-editors: Roberto Albano, Francesco M. Barbini, Giovanni Masino, Giovanni Rulli

International Scientific Committee:

Jean-Marie Barbier	CNAM, Paris	Science of the Education
Vittorio Capecchi	Università di Bologna	Methodology of the Social Sciences
Yves Clot	CNAM Paris	Psychology of Work
Renato Di Ruzza	Université de Provence	Economics
Daniel Faïta	Université de Provence	Language Science
Vincenzo Ferrari	Università degli Studi di Milano	Sociology of Law
Armand Hatchuel	Ecole des Mines Paris	Management
Luigi Montuschi	Università di Bologna	Labour Law
Roberto Scazzieri	Università di Bologna	Economics
Laerte Sznelwar	Universidade de São Paulo	Ergonomics, Occupational Medicine
Gilbert de Terssac	CNRS Toulouse	Sociology of Work

**www.taoprograms.org – dl@taoprograms.org
<http://amsacta.cib.unibo.it/>**

Publicato nel mese di Dicembre 2010
da TAO Digital Library – Bologna

A dispute about the conceptions of the decision process*

*Bruno Maggi, Università di Bologna e Università degli Studi di Milano
Andreu Solé, HEC – Paris*

Prologue

The decision process. What does it mean to decide? Is it possible to know and to understand how decisions are made, particularly within enterprises? Does a decision theory exist?

Let us listen, dear reader, to what is being said in a traditional restaurant. It is nine o' clock at night ...

In vino veritas?

William: Excellent

Paula: Quite delicate ..

Thomas: Good after-taste ..

Sitting, as usual, at the right end corner table, they are tasting a wine produced by a small winery. They have dinner together once a month in this small restaurant. They are very good friends, so they like to debate about movies, politics, literature, anything. The restaurant owner always reserves a table for them in the back of the room, as their dialogue is often quite lively. The Cannes Festival was the topic of their last discussion. Paula, Thomas and William, all in their thirties, think that they advanced pretty quickly in their career, so far: they are members of the executive board of a medium-sized industrial company.

* This paper has been presented and discussed at the 4th Italian Organization Researchers Workshop "I processi decisionali nell'organizzazione d'impresa", at the University of Florence, February 13th and 14th, 2003. It was published in the Proceedings cd-rom of this event and, afterwards, in the electronic review *Impresa Progetto*, 2006, 2: 1-15.

The choice of their dishes

Our three characters read the menu, they advise each other, they choose, they call the waitress.

William: Are you guys looking for a new job as well? (He smiles nervously)

Paula: After this morning's executive meeting, maybe I'm going to start looking. You never know.

The two of them look at Thomas, who stares back at them. Long silence.

Thomas: You mustn't feel discouraged. This morning I did hear our CEO as well, when he said he didn't rule out the sale of the company, but let me remind you that this is his third idea in the last eight months – since he started being so worried about the future of the company. Remember. First, he mentioned the possibility of an alliance with a large group in our industry. Then, he started talking about a network, saying that he was going to Germany to meet potential partners. But, please notice, what he said this morning was not clear at all. And I must tell you that I had the opportunity to talk to him directly about all this: he doesn't have a very precise idea yet. This morning, while he was talking about selling - it was the first time ever that he mentioned such possibility – do you think he was clear? There are three different scenarios in our CEO's mind – to sell, to join an alliance, to create a network – but none of them is clear.

Paula: I agree. What does it mean to sell? To whom, how, and when? What does it mean to "create an international network"? Also, there are many different kinds of alliances, in fact, there are alliances that look a lot like sales.

William: All right, I get it. Tonight we talk about work. Because we are scared, aren't we?

First dish

William: Anyway, the company cannot go on like this. The situation is getting dangerous. We are in a turbulent environment, with mergers and

acquisitions of all kinds... We cannot keep going all by ourselves, the environment has totally changed, if we don't adapt quickly we have no future. We have to adapt. What worries me the most is that our big boss is not carefully analyzing the evolution of the market, of competition, of the international context. What are we here for? He still hasn't asked the executive committee to do what we should do, a strategic analysis of the company's situation.

Paula: William, you always use the same words: market, environment, adapting, strategy... You continue to believe that the most important decisions for a company are made according to some sort of analysis. I thought that with experience you would have realized this is not what happens.

Thomas giggles, William discovers and tastes the new wine.

Thomas: Paula, you always exaggerate. My point of view is different from both Williams' and yours. William's reasoning starts off from the idea that enterprises have to adapt to the environment, since the environment is a predetermined constraint. Instead, enterprises create their own environment: they decide to launch a kind of product, to utilize a kind of technology. Companies create their own markets, the supply market and the customers' market. Enterprises choose their own competitors. They can revoke products and competitors, they can change their suppliers and customers. Remember what happened with the last product we launched two years ago: we did not start from our customers' needs. In fact, it can be argued that our product created those needs. Now, we have a new category of customers. What we call the company's environment is the outcome of all these choices.

Paula: Environment, environment ... I notice that both of you think in terms of environment. That's the difference between myself and the two of you.

William: Well, I think that the crucial issue is the following: what is going to happen to the company, to us, to all the others?

Paula: You guys are boring! We cannot know what will happen. We cannot predict what the CEO will decide. He, himself, doesn't know what he will decide either!

As he didn't want to listen to Paula, and talking to Thomas only, William keeps saying: Denying that the environment is a constraint, that's not serious! Are you denying that our competitors are getting bigger and bigger? Are you denying that some markets are crashing?

Thomas: The fact that our competitors are getting bigger, and I don't deny it - I'm not that foolish - is the result of actions and decisions made in the last few years. It is not the environment that obliges companies to get bigger. They decide to grow, and the outcome is a new situation that you call "environment". This situation creates constraints for sure, but also opportunities.

Paula: Please let me know when the two of you will stop arguing. Thanks for letting me eat my salad peacefully.

William: Do we have to sell, do we have to make an alliance with a big company, or do we have to create a network with foreign partners? This is the question we need to answer. We need to perform a strategic analysis. We need to start from the environment and see what are the implications for our marketing, production, R&D, finance ... That should be the executive board's job, as it represents the different functions of the company: marketing, production, R&D, finance ...

Paula: That's your own personal way to see the role and the work of an executive board. You talk just like those strategy books that we read and read again during our beloved studies.

William: I repeat, Paula: you are too schematic. Not all strategy books say the same thing. If you allow me, I'd like to better explain my point of view.

Thomas: Calm down guys, you're fighting like cats and dogs. Come on, William, we'll listen to you. Each of us, as usual, will express his point of view. I

have an idea: I propose to conclude with a bet, but I want to keep the surprise for the end.

Second dish

William: Thanks Thomas, I like surprises. So, as I was saying, it is necessary to perform a serious strategic analysis. We need to start from the market. If the analysis shows that our market is crashing, then it's clear, it's obvious, we need to sell as soon as possible. Sure enough, if the company was sold then you, myself and many others would be put in a pretty difficult personal situation. I am attached to our company, I like it here, but it would make perfect sense to sell. Fortunately, all our information, all the sector studies show that the market is not in a crisis, on the contrary, it is in a pretty good shape. Our problem is our market position: we are definitely too small.

Paula: In all sectors and industries there are successful small or even very small companies. I guess we all agree that our problem is not just merely related to size.

William: Yes, and the proof that the CEO is not doing a serious strategic analysis is that we could imagine a fourth scenario, again by starting from the market. The only way to be competitive, when your competitors are much larger than you are, is to offer a different product, something unusual that can guarantee a niche market. Now, the problem is that all our products, but one, are not different from our competitors'. If we pursued a differentiation strategy, we should design - very, very quickly - products that are really different and innovative. But this would require too much time, and moreover we don't have the organizational culture to do it. Remember what happened the last time we launched an innovative product, two years ago. Product innovation is our main weakness, while our main strength is marketing, since we have excellent salesmen. Thus, the differentiation solution has to be discarded, unfortunately.

Paula: If you allow me, I don't agree with your line of reasoning. You think that we have to analyze, always analyze. You forget a small detail, people's will. People are able to do things that any analysis would consider difficult, if not impossible.

William: I see your point, but we have to be realistic. Do you have an idea for a new product? Do we actually have, today, concrete proposals within the company about innovative products?

Brief silence.

Thomas: William, keep going. What's your diagnosis, doctor, about the two remaining options?

William: Let's consider the alliance option. In fact, it would be like a merger with a large company of our industry. That would allow us to finance all the investments that are absolutely necessary in order to stay in the market. Let me remind you that our financial situation is not bad, but we cannot sustain the medium term investments that are necessary in the next five years. Also, the resulting new company would be a stronger competitor. It is reasonable that, with increased size, we could put more pressure on prices, we could change the commercial situation to our advantage.

Paula: Not at all. As it always happens with mergers, we would lose our independence, we would not exist anymore!

William: Wait a minute, that is not the best solution, in strategic terms. While it is true that we have a real problem with investments, it is also true that we have no problem with prices or other commercial issues. The analysis shows that the most interesting solution is the international network. It would be a true alliance, in which all partners coordinate with each other but retain their independence. They pool together their financial resources in order to make those relevant, necessary investments. Also, since the new network will be relevant on the market, it will be able to put pressure on prices. Sure, we would have to better define this

scenario. For example, we can imagine that our company could keep its core business and sell less profitable, secondary activities to the partners.

Paula: Your reasoning is logical, and that is the problem. A logical reasoning is one that takes into account all relevant data, isn't it? But unpredictable events – economic, financial, social, technological, political – can always take place, right? You believe that the market decides, while it is the CEO who decides, not even the executive board. In the CEO's decision a number of non-economic elements have an influence: values, frames of mind, feelings, all connected to his job, his country, his personality... For example, we all know that the big boss never wanted to make more and more money. We all saw, in the last few years, that he was really concerned about preserving jobs. William, I'd like you to prove that all this does not influence the final decision.

William: Well, it's obvious that you cannot consider absolutely everything ...

Thomas: If you cannot take into consideration all the relevant elements, how can you say which one is the best decision?

William: When I say that creating a network is the best strategic decision, I mean that it is the best according to the information that is available today, about the market, about the competitors' strategy. If you remember, since the beginning I've said that we need to perform a serious analysis of the financial, commercial, technological, cultural elements ...

Paula: How do you take into account the boss' feelings? A CEO doesn't have feelings, doesn't have a heart?

The restaurant owner says hello

Walking around the tables, the restaurant owner says: "Ladies and gentlemen, is everything all right?" Paula, Thomas and William are very satisfied and exchange comments about the food.

Thomas: I've listened carefully, but I don't agree with either of you. You, William, argue that it is necessary to start from a market analysis, and that the market is the determining factor. You, Paula, say that at the beginning and end of the decision process there's always the CEO. I believe we need to start by thinking about the goals, the objectives. By "goals" I mean what we want to achieve, the expected outcomes. Are our company's goals just economic ones, like sales, profit, value for shareholders...? I agree with Paula on this: is the intention also, and to what extent, to preserve jobs? Is the company's independence also an objective? We need to ask ourselves these questions first.

Paula: I'm listening carefully too. But I feel a lot of ambiguity in what you're saying. The goals you're talking about are whose? Does a company have goals? How can you say that a company has intentions? It's like believing that a company is a person.

Thomas: I understand your critique, and I agree: a company is not a person. What I mean by "company's goals" is what results from the intentions of all the people about the company's future. Let's be clear: I'm not talking about a collective project here, but about the convergence and the overlapping of the intentions of many people. It's the CEO's intentions, but also the intentions of all those who - inside and outside the company - have an influence on its activities. It's the executive board members of course, but also the representatives of the banks, the unions ... Obviously, everyone's influence depends on their power.

William: I totally agree, it is necessary to have clear strategic objectives, we need to know where we want to go!

Thomas: William, I don't think we mean the same thing when we use the word "objective" or "goal", a word that everybody uses in so many different ways. It is not easy to find another word for what I mean. I have an image in my mind: we walk, we try to create a path, a trail, but we need to change such a path while walking, there is no final destination, just stages, and these stages will be always

different from how we imagined them. So, you see, I don't have a word to use instead of "objective" or "goal", but I hope you understand that my approach is very different from yours. The goals I'm talking about are definitely not what you call "strategic goals of the company".

Paula: I like your image of a path, it's a nice one.

The waitress cleans up the table

The debate stops for a few minutes, while the waitress cleans up the table.

Thomas: So, I was saying that the reasoning should start from the objectives, in the sense that I explained. And the objectives can be more or less clear, but they are never completely transparent, they evolve.

William: So we need to clear up our objectives, is that what you mean?

Thomas: Not at all. I repeat: objectives cannot be completely defined and cleared. What we can do is to be aware that some objectives are clearer than others. For example, is the preservation of jobs a clear objective today? After starting to clarify our goals, we need to ask ourselves about the actions to be taken in order to reach these goals. And actions to take could be, for example, requesting a line of credit from a bank, a product or technology change, outsourcing some activities... These are the means for achieving the expected outcomes. But not even the relationships between actions and desired outcomes are necessarily clear. Often, you cannot know if and how actions, that you choose, are adequate.

William: That is not clear to me. So, enterprises do not know where they are going. We do not know whether what we do is effective or not. Where do we end up with these ideas? You talk more and more like Paula.

Paula, laughing: I totally disagree with Thomas.

Thomas: I understand, William, that you are not at ease, with your logic. Let me remind you what happened in the last few months. The three current options – network, alliance, sale – were not merely CEO's ideas, but they didn't come out of

some sort of market analysis either. For example, let's take the network option. It is a fashionable idea, but the CEO actually went to Germany and Belgium in order to talk to potential partners for the creation of a network. As far as the alliance is concerned, the CEO never openly admitted it, but we know that it was an option strongly supported by one of the banks we deal with. According to this bank, that is the best solution, but I wonder if it is the CEO's favorite as well. William, you exaggerate when you say that the executive board has been completely neglected: you know that one of our colleagues has been asked by the CEO to acquire connections and to prepare a report about the alliance project. What happens is that the board doesn't work the way you wish it did: we just didn't start with a strategic analysis of the market, of our strengths and weaknesses, of our threats and opportunities ... we know the story.

Paula: You are delusional, dear Thomas. I agree with William: your influence, our influence on the final decision, as executive board members, is so limited that it could be considered insignificant. That's why your dream is to become a CEO!

Thomas: Please let's be serious. As far as the sale option is concerned, all of us in the board agree: the CEO mentioned it just to shake us up, to make us understand that we need to move, that we are doomed if we do nothing. It is not a real option. But maybe I'm just trying to reassure myself.

William: All this is just sensations, just feelings.

Thomas: But what about the contacts with potential partners in Germany and Belgium, the bank's advice, the report about the large companies of our industry ... these are facts, not feelings.

William: But these facts are mixed with many feelings, many sensations. It is not an objective analysis, you think just like Paula.

Paula: No, William, I don't agree with Thomas. And when Thomas is finished, I will tell you why.

Thomas: Thank you, Paula, for letting me finish. Our problem today, the company's problem, is that our goals are not clear enough. The objectives are not clear and still, we will have to choose. For example, if one of the goals is specifically to preserve jobs, then things become clearer: selling is not an option. If one of the goals is the independence of the company, then a network becomes a better alternative than the alliance. If, instead, the goal is to create value for the shareholders, then today we cannot know what is the best option.

William: You see, your way of thinking takes us into the darkness.

Thomas: What I try to say is that, right now, the first thing to do is to think about the goals. Only afterwards, we can think about the actions.

Dessert

Paula: Now it's my turn, thank you. Let me insist in saying that I disagree with both of you. You guys analyze, analyze ... although in different ways. After all these years of experience, I am convinced that decisions in enterprises are not made the way it is explained in management schools, especially in the strategy classes. It is only afterwards that we realize what we wanted to do, only afterwards we discover our strategies. When we talk about strategies we only justify the decision we've made, we try to make believe we knew where we were going. You, Thomas, insist on goals. I just observe that goals become clear only afterwards. For example, we will be able to say that job preservation is an actual goal only afterwards, only if we will actually do all we can to preserve them. Strategy, goals, intentions ... there's a lot of bla bla bla in all that. This is the reason why employees are so suspicious of this kind of language, or they don't even believe in it.

Thomas: So you're saying that thinking about goals is useless, that it's just a waste of time?

William: So tell me, Paula, strategy is just a ghost?

Paula: We need to talk about strategy and goals, we need to think about objectives, we must have a strategy. But all this is just a staged act. We all need to act this way in order to reassure ourselves. The more we are lost, the more we need those words in order to contain our fears. And it's because you yourselves are afraid, that tonight you can't stop talking about strategies and goals.

Thomas: Aren't you afraid, personally?

Paula: Of course I am. But I see things differently. I know this bothers you, but in the end it is the CEO that will decide the future of the company. Sure, he listens to us, sometimes he even asks our opinions, he meets with the banks, he negotiates with unions, but at decision time he's the only one to make it. Do I have to remind you of all the times when he decided against the opinion of the board, or even against the opinions of expensive consultants? Thomas, you talk about influence: I'd say that our CEO chooses to be influenced by a certain person rather than another, to be influenced by a consultant rather than another, by a certain information rather than another.

William: I don't understand anymore. You don't want to talk about strategy, but you also recognize that decisions are made and need to be made.

Paula: If you want me to use your word "strategy", then I can tell you that the company's strategy is the personal strategy of the CEO - it's his own way to see the world, to understand the customers, to perceive the environment... After all, you know, if there was a different person as CEO, a different decision would be made.

Thomas: You say that the CEO decides. But you also say that goals and intentions are just play-acting. He does not have intentions, he does not have goals, our big boss! So, he decides without knowing what he wants and where he wants to go. So, when each morning he gets out of his house, he might not know whether he's going to the office or not?

Paula: You conceive the CEO, and human beings in general, as they were constantly reflecting upon what's happening now and what could be happening tomorrow and the day after tomorrow. You believe that we need a clear idea about what's next in order to live, to take actions, to decide. I believe that our CEO, like any other person, lives his life day by day, moment by moment. I think that not our goals, but our beliefs, our feelings, our dreams, our anxieties are the most important things. It is not an easy idea to express, but the two approaches are very different. For example, you can imagine a very clear and rational goal for the company, but the CEO's personal fear to fail can be much stronger, so that he decides not to take action. Of course he won't say that he was afraid, he will probably justify his decision by using the language that we learned by studying strategy books.

The bill

William: You keep criticizing strategic analysis. But what happens when you don't use it? Let's consider what happened when we launched our last innovative product, two years ago. No analysis of our customers' needs was performed. What was the result? A ridiculous and costly fight between the production director and the product manager, as well as harsh conflicts between the new products business unit and the traditional products one. There were threats of strike. We lost a lot of time, money, energy ...

Paula: I don't understand where you're going with this. The new product is a big hit.

William: If an accurate, objective analysis would have been performed beforehand, we would have had the same success, but we would have saved time and money, and all the personal conflicts between the managers would have been avoided.

Thomas: You're forgetting that by the time the launch of the new product was decided, we had no data, no elements upon which your objective analysis could have been based. Also, you're forgetting that at the beginning the new product wasn't going well at all. The sales were well below expectations, the product didn't take off.

Paula: Do you remember why it took off, all of a sudden?

Thomas: Since the product wasn't selling, the production director, in a very logical way according to his point of view, wanted to stop production and disband the new business unit. In his opinion, the decision to make was obvious: it was a mistake to take money and people away from the traditional products. He was convinced that it was dangerous for the company, and that our future depended on the traditional products. Instead, the product manager's mind was completely different: he was convinced that our future depended on the new products. He thought we had to wait. He was sure that sales would take off soon, and that the return on investment would be very good. The reason why they confronted so harshly is that they had two opposing certainties. After all, they were both thinking just like you do, William.

William: If we had performed a strategic analysis, an objective analysis of the market, of competition, of potential customers, we would have realized that we needed to wait, that the market was not ready yet. And if we had waited, we would have saved money, time and conflicts.

Paula: The question is: what do you do when you don't know whether it's going to work or not? Especially when you have a truly new product, there's no way you can possibly know, at the time of the launch, whether it's going to work or not. It's a total unknown. How many times have market studies predicted a hit that turned out to be a failure, or vice versa? In our case, some people believed in the product, others didn't. Well, someone believed in it, against all the others. That's how it happens: you either believe in it or you don't.

Thomas: So it's like playing roulette!

Paula: I just asked you if you remember why the sales of the new products took off, all of a sudden. Nobody could predict what happened: an American multinational company, as they failed to design this kind of product – which they needed for their internal use – had to buy it on the market and decided to buy it from us. They needed the product so urgently that they were really desperate. The trust that such first, large customer, gave us, rapidly spread out in the market. As a consequence, sales took off. So, we got lucky. But in order to get lucky you need to believe in it. If we had waited, as you propose, William, we would have missed that lucky opportunity. I remind you that our first large customer decided to buy from us because we were the first on the market to sell the product and to control the technology.

William, ironic: So, you propose to manage the company using luck?

Paula: Managing a company is mostly a matter of conviction and courage, because you never know what's going to happen next.

Thomas: No! It's never a total uncertainty. You're not in such total darkness the whole time. Managing a company is mostly trying to understand where you are and what can happen, and being ready to change your pathway, because, in any way, you're always choosing a pathway.

Paula: You just reassure yourself, dear Thomas. You don't want to admit that, at any time, completely unpredictable events can happen...

Thomas: Right, and since we are not fortune tellers, we cannot know if we're going to be lucky or unlucky. If such an exceptional event had not taken place – the unpredictable problem of that American company – our new product would probably have become a total failure.

Paula: To accept good luck is to accept bad luck. But you don't accept either.

William: This is crazy! To say that managing a company is a matter of good or bad luck! So, if we want to know the destiny of the company we should buy a crystal ball or what?

Paula, very calmly: You don't want to understand, or you cannot understand what I'm saying?

The bet

Thomas: Well, I could ask the very same question to each of you two. Let's stop, it's getting late. How about that bet that I mentioned before? Each of us has to answer the following question: what decision will be made for the future of our company? Whoever guesses the right answer will win a dinner, and the other two will pay for it. We will have to wait a few days, a few weeks or months to know the winner. Agreed?

William: Agreed. I already said it. I think I've made myself clear. We need to start from reality, from the market, from competition, etc. Considering the available information today, the best solution is the network. I have nothing to add. Yes, I hope that the big boss will realize soon that facts demand such a decision.

Paula. I agree on the bet, and I repeat myself as well. William, you talk as our decisions were dictated by the reality of markets and competition ... but, what is reality? In fact, you refuse the idea that we are always free. And that's why we cannot predict decisions. Our CEO will decide, and as of today, he doesn't even know what his decision will be in the coming weeks or months. We observe him, he's hesitant. That's the proof that he's free. I think that he doesn't want to sell, but many things can happen in the next months. I'm not just talking about the competitors' reaction, the customers' behavior, or the international situation. I'm mostly talking about what could happen to him, personally. Imagine that tomorrow he finds out that he's seriously sick, or that he falls in love and wants to

live his life. Can you rule out such events? And, in such cases, can you predict what the consequences will be of his decision? So, it's impossible to know what the big boss will pull out of his hat. I have a belief or, better, a wish. He's a good man, I believe he won't sell us off like cattle.

Thomas. I don't agree about freedom with either of you. I think we are neither totally free nor totally constrained. We always have freedom, but we also always have constraints. Paula, you're asking what is reality. Everyone has his or her own vision. As I said, we cannot predict because there are too many things we don't know, things of which we cannot control. And when you don't know what to decide you can do like others do, for example, you can imitate the successful companies of your industry, considered as a model. Now, what are model companies doing in our industry? Alliances. They are making alliances. My hypothesis, then, is that our boss will choose an alliance. This is my answer.

Iacta alea est

The three characters are on the sidewalk, in front of the restaurant. They're still talking ... you can hear some good laughs and things like: "we are on the same boat ...". They say goodbye warmly. The dispute made them even closer to each other.

Epilogue

Bored by standardized and normalized presentations of research works, two researchers made the decision, maybe a little risky, to reconnect to a lost tradition: the dispute¹. They refer, in particular, to the famous Galileo's dialogue: "*Dialogo dove nei congressi di quattro giornate si discute sopra i due massimi sistemi del modo*

¹ "Dispute" comes from "disputare", in latin, which means "to clarify through examination and discussion": Le Robert, Dictionnaire Historique de la Langue Francaise. "Dispute" is "an argument between two or more people. It is a set of statements in support of an opinion or proposed course of action. It is expressed in an orderly way, and is used to try to convince someone that the opinion or course of action is correct": Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary.

tolemaico e copernicano" (Galilei, 1632). Galileo creates three characters. Simplicio, the Aristotelian philosopher whom defends tradition; Salviati, the Copernican scientist; Sagredo, representing the public, open to new ideas but who wants to know the foundations of all points of view. Our researchers also created three characters. However, the events the characters talk about are not made up, but they are taken from their own empirical research. The reader surely recognized the characters. They represent three points of view:

- William represents the point of view by which decisions are functions of external constraints, dictated by exogenous factors, in a logic of adaptation of the firm to its environment. According to this approach, the company's decisions are, and have to be, rational: they can be assessed in terms of efficiency. It is believed that, thanks to an objective analysis, uncertainty can be eliminated and, consequently, decisions can be objectively good and coherent. The starting point of the decision process is the analysis of reality, since reality is considered as an external, objective constraint. The freedom of the decision maker is neglectable. His decision is determined by reality, to which he tries to adapt. It is an objective, *a priori* rationality

- Paula represents the idea according to which decisions express the unconstrainable and full human freedom. The problem of the relationship between external constraints and decisions does not exist. Reality is not a fact imposed upon actors, not an external constraint. Reality is constructed, created, through their beliefs, their dreams, their anxieties ... These are not representations, but constructions of reality. According to this approach, the enterprise's decisions reflect the personal beliefs of the managers as well as their way of thinking, their fears, their wishes ... and their power, the institutional frame within which the firm is located. Generally, decisions are always unpredictable, there is full uncertainty. Rationality is, indeed, a rationalization, that is, an *ex-post* justification

of decisions. According to this point of view a good decision is the one that is good for the decision maker.

- Thomas represents the idea that the decision process is neither determined nor undetermined. Every decision constrains the following decisions, but such constraints are also the resources for the development of the decision process. In every circumstance there is freedom and constraints. There is no single reality, there are always several representations of reality. According to this approach, actions and decisions are supported by intentions, even if the pursued goal is neither a given nor clear. It evolves, and it transforms itself while the decision process is developed. Actions and decisions try to deal with uncertainty, which while being always present, it can be more or less influential. There are no objectively good decisions, but one can assess the relationship between desired outcomes and available means in order to achieve them. Such rationality is bounded and intentional, just as bounded is human reason.

The two researchers could have imagined and added more characters. But other characters would have expressed only minor differences. The two researchers, according to their philosophical and epistemological reflections, argue that the various existing decision theories reflect different visions of the world (Maggi, 1984/1990; 2003; Solé, 2000; 2003). How many fundamental visions of the world are there? Two, three, more than three? Not even the two researchers agree on this, they're still debating about it ... Here they display three of them, to which different decision theories correspond, as defined by their positions about fundamental issues, like freedom, reality, rationality, uncertainty.

These three visions, hence the three sets of theories, are incommensurable. No position is true, no position is false, every approach is valid in itself, and every approach is coherent. But, as the dispute shows, no approach can comprise the other two. The three characters had the same education, they lived the same events, they have the same information, but they have a different point of view,

and that leads them to feel and experience the same events in a very different way. They don't understand each other, neither when they examine a current decision process, not when they reflect on a decision that has been already made.

Maybe, dear reader, it can be noticed that sometimes the characters escape a little to their creators, they say things and show attitudes that could not be predicted...

The characters conclude their dispute with a bet. The two researchers made a bet themselves: to let the characters talk without using the academic language (or, better, the slang) of the theories' authors they indirectly refer to. While trying to give the characters a language as close as possible to the language of our time, the two researchers tried to clarify the foundations and the premises of those theories.

The characters disputed, and the two researchers as well. It hadn't always been easy... but, as for the characters, their friendship became stronger.

What is a decision? We asked this question at the beginning, dear reader. Does a decision theory exist? The dispute showed that it's impossible to talk about *the* decision theory, and that there are several conceptions of the decision process. To be a researcher, doesn't it mean, above all, to accept the dispute?

References

GALILEI G.

1632 *Dialogo dove nei congressi di quattro giornate si discorre sopra i due massimi sistemi del mondo tolemaico e copernicano*. 1890-1909 in A. Favaro (ed.), *Opere di Galileo Galilei*, Edizione Nazionale, Firenze: Barbera.

MAGGI B.

1984/1990 Note epistemologiche, in Id, *Razionalità e benessere. Studio interdisciplinare dell'organizzazione*: 179-202, Milano: EtasLibri.

2003 *De l'agir organisationnel. Un point de vue sur le travail, le bien-être, l'apprentissage*, Toulouse : Octarès Éditions.

SOLÉ A.

2000 *Créateurs des mondes. Nos possibles, nos impossibles*, Monaco, Paris : Éditions du Rocher.

2003 Une journée particulière sur les hauteurs de la Bièvre, in B. Moingeon (s/d), *Peut-on former les dirigeants ? L'apport de la recherche*, Paris : Éditions l'Harmattan.