

# Philosophy at risk : early modern epilepsy, gambling, and Descartes

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## Philosophy at Risk

### Early Modern Epilepsy, Gambling, and Descartes

David J. Hart

#### The Spirit of Gambling and the Heart of the Desert

One of the most, if not the most, powerful modern response to risk is probability theory, which emerged only in 17th-century Europe. Ian Hacking's justly famous book on the subject, *The Emergence of Probability*, argues persuasively that the concept of probability originates not in mathematics or philosophy, but in the "low" sciences, specifically the upstart hermetic medicine of Paracelsus and his followers. To understand probability, then – and therefore to understand our characteristically modern attempt to assess risk – we should focus, Hacking argues, on the way that the hermetic medical concept of the *sign* gave rise (through "mutation") to our modern concept of probability, with its epistemological and aleatory dimensions. In contrast, even though the Port Royal logicians used gaming as a model to represent epistemic probability on a numerical scale, Hacking claims that the gambling context is accidental and plays no more than a trivial role in this genealogy of probability. On his account, the most significant philosophical figures in the development of the concept are Blaise Pascal and, even more importantly, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, as well as forerunners like Thomas Hobbes and Pierre Gassendi. On the other hand, Hacking minimizes the importance of René Descartes, who, he claims, "had no truck with the nascent concept".<sup>1</sup> It was none of the philosopher's business, and so Descartes is none of ours.

I suggest we take Hacking's historicizing even more seriously than he does – and that we examine the medical debates between the hermetic doctors and the old guard in more detail and that we not ignore the spectacular developments in early modern gambling. When we push Hacking's historical inquiry further, we discover two important details for a genealogy of probability: A) the absolutely focal role of epilepsy in the medical debates, as well as a distinctively early modern link between the disease and the possibility of natural prophecy and B) an unprecedented development in the history of gambling worth exploring, namely the outbreak of a virtual gambling pandemic in early modern Europe.

Given these details and their surprising relevance to Descartes's biography and philosophy, I would like to motivate a reevaluation of the philosopher's place in the origin of probability theory and therefore indirectly in the history of risk, while also giving a sense of the riskiness of his project, both stated and implied.

Two details stand out after reading Richard Watson's wonderful biography of Descartes, his insistence on the philosopher's fondness for gambling, on the one hand, and for deserts, on the other. Remarking on a sum of money staked by the philosopher's father, thought to have been earmarked for the purchase of a governmental post, Watson says that "Descartes took the money and ran".<sup>2</sup> In this way, he laid the foundations of financial independence for the rest of his life. Before pocketing this sum, if indeed he did, the philosopher had been in the business of gambling, his only known source of income until this point. His first great biographer Adrien Baillet pronounced that in Paris in 1624 Descartes "was perfectly cured of the inclination for gambling that had formerly inspired him", to which Watson adds, "Translation: The man was a card shark".<sup>3</sup> Certainly scholars have seldom if ever meditated on this fact, that Baillet himself, whose business was to secure Descartes's reputation, so much so that Watson calls him a card-carrying member of the Saint Descartes Protection Society – Baillet himself admits that our philosopher had been a pathological gambler. He gambled at cards; he gambled at math, itself an upper-class wagering sport; he gambled that the Jesuits would accept his revolutionary philosophy; he gambled that no one would come looking for the money his father staked. He gambled and won.

It may seem strange to insist at one and the same time on Descartes's inclination to gamble and his inclination for deserts, for there wouldn't seem to be much action in the latter. But deserts need not be dead, or even unpopulated. In a letter to Pierre Chanut, Descartes claimed that "the innocence of the desert"<sup>4</sup> where he now lived, was much more pleasant than Paris. This "desert", of course, was nothing other than the United Provinces. What Descartes liked about Amsterdam was the anonymity, which approached an almost desert-like solitude. "In what other land", he asked his friend, the poet Jean-Louis Guez de Balzac, "can one enjoy freedom so entire?"<sup>5</sup> For in the confusion of bustling Amsterdam, only Descartes was not engaged in commerce, the rest so bent on their own profit that he could live there his entire life "without ever being noticed by a soul".<sup>6</sup> But to say this about early modern Amsterdam was simply to say that Descartes surrounded himself with gamblers. Of the run-up to Tulipmania, the historian Anne Goldgar writes that "all-out gambling, without the excuse of charitable intent [...] remained a central feature of Dutch culture", indeed that "it sometimes seemed that the Dutch would make a bet on anything".<sup>7</sup> Given the casino

atmosphere of the city and its culture of risk, in which the Dutch entertained all manner of proposition wagers, the philosopher's city seemed both ascetic and ludic at once.

## The Great Disease

Descartes came to Amsterdam burning to unseat the old guard. However, this would involve a confrontation with the Greek medical tradition, for medicine, according to received wisdom, was simply the philosophy of the body, or in the words of Harvard historian Steven Shapin, "philosophy in action".<sup>8</sup> We know its importance for Descartes. Having come from a medical family, his vision of a new practice was, according to Shapin, "more clear, coherent and ambitious than that of any other seventeenth-century intellectual modernizer".<sup>9</sup> Descartes tells us in the *Discourse* that medical advancement would be the primary result of a newly liberated philosophy. Supposedly already in possession of a method that would secure these advances, he concluded the *Discourse* by publicly announcing his plan "to devote the rest of [his] life to nothing other than trying to acquire some knowledge of nature from which we may derive rules of medicine which are more reliable than those we have had up until now".<sup>10</sup> A new philosophy required a new medicine and *vice versa*.

Hacking, of course, claimed that the early modern medical debates acted as a crucible for the emerging concept of probability. The traditionalists, in the line of Aristotle, Hippocrates, and Galen, were opposed by an upstart group of hermetic thinkers, Paracelsus foremost among them, whose concept of "sign" mutated into probability.<sup>11</sup> Hacking's historical account of this emergence, I believe, is convincing on the whole, but I wonder whether he paid enough attention to the specific content of these medical debates. At the very center of them was epilepsy, for the traditionalists by and large considered the disease most intractable, if not incurable. And this, for the modernizers, was a great weakness in Greek-style medicine, and, for that matter, in the philosophical foundations on which it was based. If the new wave of doctors could succeed here, where the traditionalists habitually foundered, then the modernizing medicine could be legitimated in spectacular fashion.<sup>12</sup>

And yet these hopes were ambivalent. It was true that, owing to the horror of his or her symptoms and the appearance of incurability, the epileptic was thought, through sheer wretchedness, to be deserving of the utmost pity. Nevertheless, at this point in the history of epilepsy, the afflicted became associated with greatness or genius in an unprecedented way. "The knowledge that even great men might suffer from epilepsy", as Owsei Temkin, the former director of the Institute of

the History of Medicine, says, “culminated paradoxically in the belief that most epileptics were men of great intelligence”, an extension of the claim found in the (pseudo-)Aristotelian work *Problems*.<sup>13</sup> The 17th-century French physician Jean Taxil, among others, had drawn attention to this text in his well-known list of “famous epileptics”, which echoed it.<sup>14</sup> The *Problems* asked: “Why is it that all those who have become eminent in philosophy or politics or poetry or the arts are clearly of an atrabilious temperament, and some of them to such an extent as to be affected by diseases caused by black bile, as is said to have happened to Heracles among the heroes?”<sup>15</sup> Heracles, the author(s) suggested, suffered from epileptic afflictions, which explained why the ancients referred to the disease euphemistically as “the sacred disease”. But no shame in that, for so too did the heroes Ajax and Bellerophon, as well as the philosophers Empedocles, Plato, and Socrates, to say nothing of the poets, who were particularly afflicted. Indeed, according to the (pseudo-)Aristotle, all of the eminent were of this character.

A word or two about this list of epileptics: firstly, as Temkin pointed out, the *Problems* did not claim that all of these outstanding men were literally epileptics, only that they were of an atrabilious temperament and therefore susceptible to the diseases caused by black bile. Taxil, however, presented the list as if they all suffered from “the sacred disease”. That he misread the traditional list in this way points to the specifically early modern development that I mentioned above: increasingly, greatness was thought to imply epilepsy or at least a tendency to suffer it. So, by Descartes’s time, the *Problems* “gave classical authority to the idea that great men were particularly prone to epilepsy”.<sup>16</sup>

More than this, medical thinking of the time, in an attempt to free itself from the so-called “magical conception” of the disease, sought to deal with the well-ingrained association in the popular mind (and even certain learned minds) between epilepsy and prophesy. The disease, after all, had long been known by the synonym *divinatio*, and prophesying epileptics were by no means rare in Descartes’s time; Taxil himself had referred to shamanistic priests of the New World as current examples.<sup>17</sup> Despite some skepticism in respect to its frequency, doctors tended not to deny that epileptics were sometimes prophetic, but increasingly understood this as a natural phenomenon, rather than as cases of divine or diabolical possession. To be great was to be prone to epilepsy, and to be epileptic was sometimes to be prophetic, but this did not mean, or so the argument went, that great men who prophesied were possessed – their predictions might be purely human and not supernatural, and yet genuinely prophetic nevertheless.<sup>18</sup> One wonders what use the opportunistic gamblers would have made of these “great” ones.

Before plunging forward again, I want to make use of an interesting detail concerning Ajax and Bellerophon, mentioned in the *Problems* immediately after the eponymous case of Heracles. Bellerophon, we read, “sought out habitations

in desert places”, which is why Homer writes of him: “And since of all the gods he was hated, / Verily o’er the Aleian plain alone he would wander, / Eating his own heart out, avoiding the pathway of mortals.”<sup>19</sup> It seems that the hero himself, like Descartes, was fond of deserts, in this case out of necessity. This wouldn’t be surprising if he suffered from epilepsy, for according to the ancient popular or “magical” conception of the “falling sickness”, with its fear of contagion and demonic influence, the disease was particularly disgraceful. Even to look upon the epileptic in the confusion of his or her fit was to risk falling oneself, and so the sufferer was to be spat upon and driven out, if he or she did not preemptively retreat to some private place, where no one could see. For these reasons, as Temkin says in his discussion of these attitudes, “the epileptic who felt an attack coming on rushed home, or to a deserted place where as few as possible could see him fall”.<sup>20</sup> The euphemisms for epilepsy have been legion: “the sacred disease”, “the great disease”, “the falling sickness”, *divinatio*, and more besides. I make bold to add another: epilepsy, in its shamefulness, was the “desert disease”, a suitable place for the unclean, however, prophetic they might later seem to be.

But what of Ajax, with whom Bellerophon of the desert is linked? Interestingly enough, the Greeks connected him with gambling. In vasework, for example, Ajax gaming with Achilles was a standard subject matter of painters, especially among the Leagros group.<sup>21</sup> When Ajax subsequently gambled that he could best Odysseus in a dispute over Achilles’s armor, he again wound up a loser and, as a result, went mad and attacked the Greek herd, thinking that they were soldiers. The *Problems* references this madness as evidence of his atrabilious temperament, if not his epilepsy. What does it mean, this seeming affinity between Bellerophon and Ajax; between the desert epileptic and the gambler?

### The Physician of Princesses

Throughout his life, Descartes did not shrink from offering medical advice. Shapin noted three cases as being representative of this trait. First, Descartes, even though he had not delivered to Marin Mersenne the medical system based on “infallible demonstrations” which he had promised, “still felt himself to be in a position to tell Mersenne how a mutual friend, Claude Clerselier, ought to be treated for epileptic fits”.<sup>22</sup> He warned against blood-letting, a common practice, he says, among Parisian doctors, and instead recommended an incision to clear out possible infection. Indeed, Descartes thought Clerselier’s epilepsy “a common enough malady” and in fact thought his friend’s case quite curable.<sup>23</sup> In addition to these prescriptions, Descartes volunteered some medical advice in 1647 to a sickly Blaise Pascal, who would do his famous work on probability in respect

to games of chance a few years later. The philosopher's most extensive medical advice, however, was given to his frequent correspondent Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, whom scholars are beginning to appreciate. Descartes cautioned her against blindly following both the remedies of the court physicians and those of the modernizing chemists, the bleedings and the drugs, as well as the miraculous spring at Hornhausen lauded by the people.<sup>24</sup>

On the whole, Shapin claims, Descartes's medical advice was neither radical nor innovative, but was in fact quite traditional. His advice, in therapeutic contexts, was just the sort that an "orthodox early modern Galenic physician" might give,<sup>25</sup> and therefore, since these prescriptions were supposed to follow from a radical reform of philosophy, the implication seems to be that the Cartesian reformation was an illusion.<sup>26</sup> And so in *The Passions of the Soul*, which had been seen by both Clerselier and Elisabeth before publication, which Elisabeth herself had urged him to publish, Descartes presents a thoroughgoing interaction between body and soul by way of the passions, allowing for both psychosomatic and somatopsychic disorders. This would have been quite familiar to a Galenic medical man, as would have been the therapeutic advice, focusing on regimen and dietetics, that followed from this vision. Imagining a visit to Dr. Descartes, Shapin has the philosopher giving advice on the traditional order of "take two and call me in the morning", ending with Descartes's most characteristic prescription to "cheer up: avoid thinking about things that make you distressed; dwell on pleasant objects and memories; look on the bright side of life".<sup>27</sup> Given the influence of the soul on the body via the passions, this was sound advice, which Princess Elisabeth, for one, was urged to follow.

But was there really nothing new about Descartes's medical advice? Perhaps Descartes's advice regarding the passions and their maintenance was indeed traditional. Even so, some of his advice is not so easily assimilated. It's true, for instance, that Descartes gave Princess Elisabeth some traditional advice about the passions in an important letter of October or November 1646, but then he turns confessional (almost conspiratorial), adding: "Indeed I even venture to think that an inner joy has some secret power to make Fortune more favourable."<sup>28</sup> This is not the advice Descartes would give weak-minded, average Joes, because "it would lead them into some superstition".<sup>29</sup> In respect to his illustrious interlocutor, though, his only fear is that she will mock him for his credulity. Nevertheless, he adds, his stunning claim is respectable philosophically, based as it is on "countless" personal experiences that corroborate it, as well as the example of Socrates. For what was Socrates's *daimon* but his own conscience or "inner voice"? Unlike Socrates's infamous *daimon*, however, which always warned against action, Descartes's own inner voice forecasted success. "Even in games of chance", he explains, "where Fortune alone rules, I have always

enjoyed better luck when I had reasons for joy than when I was sad.”<sup>30</sup> Socrates, he claims, followed the dictates of his own conscience to a degree approaching superstition, not even venturing out of his house at times, but nevertheless “with regard to the important actions of life, when their outcome is so doubtful that prudence cannot tell us what we ought to do, I think it quite right for us to follow the ‘the voice within’”.<sup>31</sup>

This was novel advice, indeed. It was in fact the advice of novels, or at least of romance. As the great literary critic Northrop Frye explains: “[The] pattern in romance is the story of the hero who goes through a series of adventures and combats in which he always wins [...]. The success of the hero derives from a current of energy which is partly from him and partly outside him. It depends partly on the merit of his courage, partly on certain things given him: unusual strength, noble blood, or a destiny prophesied by an oracle.”<sup>32</sup>

“The most basic term for this current of energy”, he says, “is luck (Icelandic *gaefa*)”, which extends quite literally even to games of chance. Such luck, it turns out, “is highly infectious: the lucky man can always form a *comitatus* or group of devoted followers around him”.<sup>33</sup> Equally infectious, though, is bad luck, for once suffered, “the unlucky man must be avoided like the plague, because in a sense he is the plague”.<sup>34</sup> An unlucky man, Aeolus told Odysseus, is “hated by the gods”, and so it’s not surprising when, for instance, a snake-bitten Mark Anthony can no longer beat Caesar when they gamble. This is what happens when conscience goes bad: such a man must be driven out.

Descartes’s was the advice of romantic novels, but it was also akin to the advice of Machiavelli, when, in *The Prince*, he introduced his infamous metaphor: Fortune is (a) Woman, and therefore will only submit to those who seize and command her. I say “introduced”, although Sebastian de Grazia points out that this is the metaphor’s first appearance only “in great literature”, it being a familiar theme “in folklore or in the theater of street and square”.<sup>35</sup> Immediately before, Machiavelli had discussed Fortune in a different way, saying that it was like a “ruinous” river, which one must guard against by building dikes and canals. “Foresee and Prepare” would seem to be the motto of this stance, as de Grazia remarks, for Fortune so opposed would turn aside to the unprepared.<sup>36</sup> Traditional advice, this – but the following metaphor follows new paths, for here Machiavelli seems to be claiming that impetuous action, and not the cool calculation of the dike builders, is favored by Fortune. To act in the “audacious” way suggested by Machiavelli’s novel metaphor is precisely to act without foresight and preparation. Such advice could be defended (somewhat) rationally on the grounds that since Fortune herself is impetuous and irrational, she favors those most like herself, and therefore in effect Machiavelli, “the Physician of Princes”, prescribes a homeopathic, almost hermetic remedy.



Whatever Descartes was prescribing privately to Princess Elisabeth, he certainly was not recommending such remedies publicly. “We must, then, entirely set aside the vulgar opinion that there is outside of us a Fortune which causes things to happen or not happen in accordance with its pleasure”,<sup>37</sup> he writes in *The Passions of the Soul*. However, in the same work, which, again, Elisabeth herself had urged him to publish, Descartes clearly seems to be talking about the “inner joy” that he referenced in their letters. “Our good and our harm”, he writes, “depend mainly on the interior emotions of which are excited in the soul by the soul itself, in which respect they differ from its passions which always depend on some movement of the spirits.”<sup>38</sup> A man may feel a “secret joy” in his heart even on the death of a beloved wife, and while the passions of love or pity may move him to sincere tears, he may nevertheless experience an inner emotion so powerful “that the sadness and tears which accompany it can do nothing to diminish its force”.<sup>39</sup> Such a joy, he explains, is especially apparent when “we read of strange adventures in a book, or see them represented in a theatre”,<sup>40</sup> adventures that stir up all manner of passions, but which do not, for all that, diminish our pleasure at seeing them thus represented. This pleasure is “intellectual joy”, and clearly it is the same one he discussed privately with Elisabeth, the “voice within” of good conscience. But here he makes no special claims – vulgar, romantic claims – for its effect on Fortune: to do so, it seems, would be to fall prey to superstition. Nevertheless, we remember Descartes’s letter and its private confession: “Indeed I even venture to think that an inner joy has some secret power to make Fortune more favourable.” In this, he believed himself a second Socrates, for “what is commonly called [his] ‘inner voice’ [...] was undoubtedly nothing other than his being accustomed to follow his inner inclinations, and his believing that an undertaking would have a happy outcome when he entered upon it with a secret feeling of cheerfulness.”<sup>41</sup> And this even though we know, as Descartes surely knew, that Socrates’s *daimon* only warned against action and never encouraged and that Descartes himself, in so prescribing, was treading new paths.

### Coming Attractions

Why all this talk about epilepsy and Fortune? Because they played an as yet unacknowledged role in the birth of probability and the history of risk. Because only now in Descartes’s time does epilepsy become not just the disease of the desert, the sufferer to be spat upon and driven out as scapegoat, but also the disease of the great, a symptom or, better yet, a sign of their greatness and that which makes natural prophecy possible, without the sacred dread attached to devil or god. Because only now do we have a philosopher who claims to have a *daimon*

with a predictive power that not only cautions against action, but positively guides action. Because only now, with Descartes, the secret confidence of the gambler becomes philosophical – gambling, too, is philosophy in action. I suggest that, with these points in mind, Descartes’s story may suddenly seem very fresh to historians of risk, maybe even dangerous to historians of philosophy. May the returns prove equal to the risks.

#### Notes

- 1 Ian Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability*, London 1975, 45.
- 2 Richard Watson, *Cogito, Ergo Sum. The Life of René Descartes*, Boston 2007, 124.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 124.
- 4 Quoted *ibid.*, 161.
- 5 René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. III: *The Correspondence*, translated by John Cottingham et al., Cambridge 1991, 32.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 31.
- 7 Anne Goldgar, *Tulipmania. Money, Honor, and Knowledge in the Dutch Golden Age*, Chicago 2007, 219.
- 8 Steven Shapin, “Descartes the Doctor. Rationalism and its Therapies”, *British Journal for the History of Science* 33/2 (2000), 131–154, here 132.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 135.
- 10 René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. I: *Discourse on the Method*, translated by John Cottingham et al., Cambridge 1985, 151.
- 11 Hacking (see note 1), 9 f, 34 f., 39–48.
- 12 Owsei Temkin, *The Falling Sickness. A History of Epilepsy from the Greeks to the Beginnings of Modern Neurology*, Baltimore 1971, 137 f., 170–173.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 163.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 161.
- 15 William D. Ross (ed.), *The Works of Aristotle Translated into English*, vol. VII: *Problemata*, translated by E. S. Forster, Oxford 1971 (reprint of the 1st ed. 1927), 953a, 10–14.
- 16 Temkin (see note 12), 21.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 149 f.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 148–164.
- 19 Ross (see note 15), 953a, 22–25.
- 20 Temkin (see note 12), 9.
- 21 James N. Davidson, *The Greeks and Greek Love*, New York 2007, 724.
- 22 Shapin (see note 8), 142.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 142.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 143 f.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 149.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 151.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 149.
- 28 Descartes (see note 5), 296.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 296 f.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 297.
- 31 *Ibid.*
- 32 Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture. A Study of the Structure of Romance*, Cambridge 1976, 67.
- 33 *Ibid.*

- 34 Ibid.  
35 Sebastian de Grazia, *Machiavelli in Hell*, New York 1994, 211 f.  
36 Ibid., 211.  
37 René Descartes, *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, vol. 1: *The Passions of the Soul*, translated by E. S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross, Cambridge 1967, 397.  
38 Ibid., 398.  
39 Ibid.  
40 Ibid.  
41 Ibid., 297.

## Résumé

### **Philosophie «à risque». Descartes, l'épilepsie et les jeux de hasard à l'époque moderne**

Quel est le lien secret entre le désert et les jeux de hasard? La question peut inspirer une relecture du rôle joué par Descartes dans la genèse de la théorie des probabilités et par conséquent dans l'histoire du risque. Lorsqu'on pousse plus loin l'enquête novatrice *The Emergence of Probability* de Ian Hacking, on découvre deux détails importants dans la généalogie du concept de probabilité: le rôle central des causes de l'épilepsie dans les débats médicaux de la première modernité dans le cadre du débat sur les propriétés du corps et de l'esprit, et le déclenchement d'une sorte de pandémie européenne des jeux d'argent qui aboutit à des bulles spéculatives. Depuis Hippocrate, l'épilepsie avait été associée à la solitude; avec la modernité, elle se relie également au génie en général et au don de prophétie en particulier. C'est ce que mettent en évidence les lectures de l'époque de l'ouvrage (pseudo-)aristotélicien *Problemata*, qui établissaient elles aussi un rapport entre l'épileptique solitaire et le joueur.

Pour sa part, Descartes donna toute sa vie des conseils médicaux à titre privé, y compris au sujet de l'épilepsie. Il soutenait également posséder un *daímōn* capable d'influencer, ou du moins de prédire, la fortune, et il citait ses succès au jeu comme une preuve spectaculaire de cela. Il prétendait, ainsi, posséder un don naturel de prophétie qui, en quelque sorte, le mettait sur un pied d'égalité avec Socrate qui, selon les *Problemata*, était lui-même un épileptique. Parce que Descartes possédait (ou du moins pensait posséder) le «don» de l'épileptique, il pouvait (à titre privé) conseiller des actions particulièrement hardies pour un philosophe.

(Traduction: Stefano Condorelli)

## Zusammenfassung

### **Wagemutige Philosophie. Descartes, die Epilepsie und das Glücksspiel in der Frühen Neuzeit**

Was ist die geheimnisvolle Verbindung zwischen der Einsamkeit der Wüste und dem Glücksspiel? Eine Antwort auf diese Frage könnte einen neuen Zugang zur Rolle von Descartes bei der Entstehung der Wahrscheinlichkeitstheorie und damit indirekt in der Geschichte des Risikos ermöglichen. Wenn Ian Hacking's bahnbrechende Untersuchung *The Emergence of Probability* weiterentwickelt wird, lassen sich zwei wichtige Details in der Genealogie des Probabilitätskonzepts erkennen: die zentrale Bedeutung der Debatten um die Ursachen der Epilepsie in der frühmodernen Medizin im Rahmen der Erörterungen um die Eigenschaften von Körper und Geist und der Ausbruch einer virtuellen Glückspielpandemie in Europa, die zu Spekulationsblasen führte. Epilepsie wurde seit Hippokrates mit Einsamkeit assoziiert. In der Frühmoderne wurde die Krankheit nach der Lektüre des (pseudo)aristotelischen Werks *Problemata* allgemein mit Geistesgrösse und speziell mit der Möglichkeit der Prophetie in Verbindung gebracht. In der *Problemata* wurde das Bild des einsamen Epileptikers wiederum mit dem des Glückspielers verknüpft.

Descartes erteilte Zeit seines Lebens medizinische Ratschläge, ohne Epilepsie auszuschliessen. Um seinen (metaphysischen) Empfehlungen mehr Gewicht zu verleihen, verwies er auf sein Glück als Spieler, das er einem *Daimon* verdanke. Tatsächlich nahm er für sich die Fähigkeit der Prophetie in Anspruch, womit er sich in gewisser Weise in eine Reihe mit Sokrates stellte, der in der *Problemata* in einer Liste mit berühmten Epileptikern aufgeführt wird. Weil Descartes die Gabe der Prophetie besass – oder zumindest zu besitzen glaubte –, erteilte er (im Privaten) für Philosophen wagemutige Ratschläge.

*(Übersetzung: Daniel Krämer und Tina Asmussen)*