The Missing Cartesian Ethic: An Examination of Descartes’ ‘Provisional’ Morality

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Abstract

This study focuses attention on the morale par provision as found in Rene Descartes’ Discourse on Method (1637). I explain the relationship between Cartesian Method and the ‘provisional morality’ by reading the Discourse as a fable. The moral to this fable suggests that due to the extreme doubt advised by the first rule of Method, one needs a morale par provision to regulate our actions. ‘Provisional’ morality contrasts sharply with ‘the highest and most perfect moral system’ alluded to in the Preface to the Principles (1647).

By stressing the unity as opposed to duality of Cartesian Ethics, however, we see that the maxims of the Discourse, which Descartes revises in a letter to Elizabeth (1645), are the very tools or provisions one uses to construct the framework of a most perfect morality. The most perfect morality will attain moral certainty, a more relaxed requirement than metaphysical or absolute certainty. We are provided with the framework for a most perfect morality, yet Descartes never fully developed a definitive view on morals. Hence I consider various explanations why the Cartesian Ethic is missing.

Perhaps it was Descartes’ view that particular moral judgments can be decided by the individual, on a case-by-case basis. The individual of bon sens--bound only by a loose set of prudential and practical maxims (to try to make decisions with full knowledge of all the facts, to show firm resolution in carrying out these decisions, and to become accustomed to desire only those things that are within our power) and enlightened by the truths of natural science--is capable of judging what is true or false, right or wrong, for him or herself.

This interpretation of Cartesian Ethics allows us to appreciate the novelty of Cartesian Ethics, and renders intelligible Descartes’ apprehension in expressing his views...
on morality. It is my hope that this study of Cartesian Ethics will help debunk the myth that Descartes ‘hardly touched on ethics proper,’ and will encourage others to take a more than cursory look at these aspects of Descartes’ thought and writings.