



Passions in Marguerite Hessein, Mme de La Sablière (1640–1693)

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In her moral philosophy, Marguerite Hessein, Madame de la Sablière stresses that the will alone determines the virtuous or vicious nature of an act. The passions can easily mislead the moral agent into believing she has acquired some moral merit when in fact no such moral maturation has occurred. The vague desire to reform oneself is pointless unless it is accompanied by a firm intention to repent of one's sins and this intention is actually executed by some palpable acts of reformation. Facing the reality of her sinful acts, the moral agent often experiences feelings of remorse and guilt, but without accompanying intentional acts of repentance, such gusts of passion lead the moral agent into a dangerous illusion.

The emotional semblance of repentance is mistaken for the actual state of repentance, with its characteristic willingness to make reparation for one's sins, to sin no more, and to avoid the occasion of such sins in the future. It is the posture of the will, and not the moral emotions swirling around the will, which determines one's moral status and whether one has actually renounced one's sinfulness. La Sablière's negative perspective on the passions is tied to her voluntarist concept of God and the human person. The most striking attribute of God is the divine will; an action is right because it conforms to the divine will and wrong because it opposes it. When the will of the human agent obeys the divine will, authentic happiness emerges; when the human will defies the divine will through sin, the divine will is still operative through the spiritual and temporal misfortunes which fall upon the disobedient moral agent. For La Sablière, the worst of moral conditions is complete abandonment to one's passions without the limitations provided by reason, will, and restraining virtues.

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