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Virtue Ethics in Agnès Arnauld (1593–1671)

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Agnès Arnauld developed a monastic code of virtue during her tenure as the abbess of the Jansenist convent of Port-Royal. She distinguishes between perfect and imperfect versions of the monastic virtues. The perfect version is theocentric, focused upon God alone, while the imperfect is anthropocentric, tainted by self-concern. The perfect version of reverence, for example, is focused wholeheartedly upon the adoration of God, while the imperfect version of reverence vacillates between attention to God and attention to worldly objects one fears losing. Perfect submission to the divine will is impervious to emotional turbulence while imperfect submission seeks sensible consolations. Perfect zeal seeks only God's glory; imperfect zeal seeks worldly recognition for one's efforts. Humility, the most prized of monastic virtues, involves the annihilation of oneself before the glory and mystery of God.

In the act of adoration, the humble votary recognizes her total nothingness and her complete dependence upon God for her existence and salvation. The radical theocentrism and stress on self-annihilation in Mère Agnès's account of virtue reflects the influence of the Oratorians (Pierre de Bérulle and Charles Condren) who served as the convent's preachers and spiritual directors.

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adoration, annihilation, monasticism, perfection, theocentrism, transcendence, virtue, Pierre de Bérulle, Charles Condren