



Determinism and Freedom in Angélique Arnauld (1591-1661)

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The reforming abbess of the convent of Port-Royal, Angélique Arnauld develops a paradoxical account of determinism and freedom in her writings. On the metaphysical level she is often a determinist, insisting that God is the cause of all physical and moral action. But on the moral and political level, she often defends the freedom and responsibility of the individual human agent. Faithful to her Jansenist theology, Mère Angélique defends the doctrine of predestination; God knows and determines from all eternity who will be saved and who will be left in the state of sin inherited through the fall of Adam and Eve. This salvific design is inscrutable; it is not dependent upon the merit of the one saved through grace. Human beings are free inasmuch as they can choose one course of action over another. But the unsaved can only choose one evil over another; even apparent choices of the good are tainted by the pride flowing from original sin. The saved can choose one good over another only due to the unmerited presence of grace guiding their moral perceptions and elections.

In exhortations to her subjects and correspondents, however, the abbess insists that they cultivate the moral virtues and that they take responsibility for their actions. She is particularly zealous in her defense of the rights of nuns. They are to elect their own superiors, participate in the elaboration of their own conventional rules, and to develop a substantial theological culture (in the case of Port-Royal, an Augustinian one). As the conflict over Jansenism engulfed the convent, the abbess argued that the nuns should not practice blind obedience to political and ecclesiastical authorities attempting to suppress Jansenism; they had the right and duty to defend the truth they had discovered through their prayer and study.

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