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## *Religious Knowledge in Agnès Arnauld (1593–1671)*

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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.

An abbess of the Jansenist convent at Port-Royal, Agnès Arnauld developed an apophatic philosophy of the divine attributes in her writings, especially in her controversial *Private Chaplet* (Apophatic theology stresses the transcendence and unknowability of God.). Privileged negative attributes of God include inaccessibility, incomprehensibility, illimitability, and incommunicability. Authentic knowledge of God, recognizing the finitude

of the human mind, underscores the unfathomable chasm between the perfect Creator and the all too imperfect creature. Even the traditional positive attributes of God are given an apophatic interpretation by the abbess. God's holiness, for example, is manifest in a radical otherness from the sinful humanity that attempts to approach God. The noetic agent does not arrive at the affirmation of these negative divine attributes through logical reflection. This illumination emerges as the fruit of contemplative adoration before the mystery of God, wherein the human self and its inadequate images of God undergo a spiritual annihilation.

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