



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

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In her ethical theory, Marguerite Hessein, Madame de la Sablière develops a pointed critique of the moral virtues. She contends that the moral life is a conflict between the paramount virtue of humility and the paramount vice of pride. Without grace, humility has little chance to emerge in the moral agent. The alleged virtues of the “good pagan” of antiquity are illusory; they are the outcroppings of an omnipresent pride. The cardinal virtues do not escape her censure. Without charity, prudence is only a species of cowardice. It simply permits the wily moral agent to avoid future dangers. Similarly, the courage of the pagan is fueled by pride.

It may flare out in contempt for the world, but this arrogant defiance is not the same as the Christian’s contempt for the world, which is a willingness to suffer the world’s hostility for the sake of the truth. An authentic moral life requires the presence of the theological virtues, infused by God’s grace. The virtue of faith permits the moral agent to recognize the moral order created by God; without faith, a darkened human intellect (damaged by original sin) can only devise an erroneous approximation of the moral order. In giving the moral agent confidence in eternal life, the virtue of hope provides the moral agent with a durable motivation to withstand the allure of sin. The theological virtue of charity constitutes the soul of the moral life; without it, the moral life deteriorates into formal gestures or into apparent virtues fueled by hidden vice.

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