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Nature in Antoinette du Ligier de la Garde, Mme Deshoulières (1638–1694)

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A disciple of Gassendi, Madame Deshoulières expounds a naturalist metaphysics in her poetry. Following Lucretius, she conceives nature as a network of atomic particles, whose dynamism emerges through the constant interplay of attraction and repulsion among its constituent parts. Rather than transcending nature, as rationalist philosophers contend, humanity is totally inscribed within the web of nature. The difference between human beings and other animals is one of degree, and not of kind. The human actions often ascribed by philosophers to free will can be explained by material causation. Human beings naturally choose to seek food, shelter, and affection. It is the instinct for survival, and not the mysterious operation of a spiritual soul, that guides human beings in these predictable choices. Similarly, the moral virtues can be explained in terms of material causation rather than as the effects of a free, spiritual will. Prudential avoidance of risky behavior is a predictable outcome of the human instinct to avoid death, injury, and diminishment.

The human phenomenon of love is only a sophisticated variation on the dynamic interplay of attraction and repulsion which characterizes the entire material cosmos. The human pretension to immortality is especially dangerous since it leads human being to focus their endeavors on an illusory future and to exercise an illegitimate dominion over other material beings. For Deshoulières, nature is a moral norm as well as a metaphysical principle. She criticizes the tendency of human beings to mistreat other animals and to mar the natural landscape (through the construction of dams, for example) in the name of an allegedly superior human reason. Environmental degradations are the tangible result of the misestimation of human transcendence and superiority.

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