



Center for the History of Women Philosophers and Scientists
Paderborn University, Germany

Virtue Ethics in Antoinette du Liger de la Garde, Mme Deshoulières (1638–1694)

John J. Conley
Loyola University of Maryland

A naturalist in her metaphysics, Antoinette du Liger de la Garde, Madame Deshoulières developed a critique of moral virtue consistent with her naturalist metaphysics. A disciple of Gassendi, Deshoulières argues that apparently spiritual actions or traits of humanity can be explained by material causation. The moral virtues can in fact be explained by instinctual response to the human person's material environment. *Réflexions diverses* (1686) provides the clearest critique of human pretensions to virtue. The wisdom allegedly possessed by elderly persons is not a perfection of the intellect, it is a natural instinct opposing danger and welcoming succor that slowly arises from decades of negotiating an external nature featuring both. Similarly, prudence arises instinctually from the experience of hostile forces in the environment which should be avoided in the future. If virtue is an illusion, the vice of pride is not. It is pride which leads humans to overestimate the power of human reason and to attribute certain virtuous traits to reason which are in fact the product of predictable instinctual reaction. Deshoulières criticizes the cult of classical virtue pursued by many of her contemporaries. There is nothing courageous about the decision of certain Greek and Roman heroes to commit suicide. In such cases the painful nature of life if one stayed alive outweighed the negative value of death. Like other animals, human beings act according to a pain-pleasure axis governed by instinct rather than by some exceptional activity of the intellect or will.

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