

**Confessions of a Young Philosopher**

by

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## Preface

When I was a young girl, I wanted to be a great lover or a famous saint.

This memoir begins, however, when I was a bit older, with aims somewhat more nuanced. I wanted to be *conscious* of the purposes behind my choices, not let them guide me unawares. I wanted also to figure out what gave *others* their motives to act and feel as they did. It was a point of honor not to profess views if I was not prepared to put them to the test of living them. And to encounter new experience unencumbered by rigid preconceptions.

I did have certain views, though. They were not atypical for that time, nor, I suspect, for any time. I thought a girl (or boy) had to find true love, if the life was to be *sincere*. One could claim that one's great ambition was to be "a good scholar," or a fighter against those who exploit the poor, or a mystical seeker for God, but – if you didn't look out for your romantic interests – all that might just be *displacement*. You had to find out *what you really wanted*, and go for it intelligently, or else whatever you did for the greater good might be classed as compensatory -- as Plan B.

Cynicism was a rigid filter I declined to wear. It too was *insincere*, I thought. Cynics, I felt sure, expressed disappointment. Their principle of low expectations was the surface layer covering some early disillusionment that they feared compounding. To me it seemed more honest to honor one's original hope and make a second or third attempt to realize it. Better to remember how the first hope got thwarted and try not to make the same mistake twice! That would be preferable to abandoning the aspiration -- and more to the point. Of course I knew that I would meet life already clothed in an "identity" -- not as an observer safe above the battle. I was a New York Jewish girl, born and raised in Manhattan, where I'd gone to high school and college, the child of interesting parents, now in Paris on a Fulbright grant and away from home for the first time.

None of this seemed to me a limitation. There was the Holocaust, of course, at the horizon of Jewish experience. My parents had done rescue work while it was going on. It was an intimate fact, almost a memory. It meant that the facts of moral life, the facts of history, couldn't be glossed over. I was obliged to seek the truth of whatever situation I found myself in. Life was not a game. Success was not the goal. Real life was serious.

Did I think there was a God? Certainly I was no atheist. I knew that *sanctity* was a possible goal in people's search for a good life. About *wickedness* my notions were more vague and abstract. For me, God was at least Witness and Backup for a hopeful approach to experience that allowed one to look events and feelings in the face without trying to make them other than they were.

What about God and the Jews? What had happened in that relationship? Those questions seemed so embedded in the human story, so perennial and unresolved, that I felt no urgency about finding my way on *that* terrain. It was simply there, the question of God and the Jews -- a big part of the topography of the world. Of anti-semitism, I had little or no personal experience.

I did feel obliged, as a Jewish girl who was not stupid, to situate my life on the larger map of human striving -- in a world that was wide, not narrow. I wanted to know *where I was*, and not just in the realm of private and personal options. Instinctively, I sought to get my bearings and location in human history itself. It wasn't a matter of ambition to "make history" or even "make a difference" in history. I just wanted to know how to find *me* in the bigger story.

What did that mean, concretely?

If, for instance, a historian discovers a young girl's cache of letters and the writer turns out an adherent of the Cathari movement in thirteenth-century, southern France, the historian's introduction to the published edition will take for granted that this narrative is not *merely personal*. It is also the story of a Cathar, who will suffer the consequences of decisions made in the Vatican to suppress that sect. Her thoughts, feelings, hopes and ordeal will thus be locatable in the history of the world.

That *place in the story* was what I was trying to find for my own early life, as I went along. It motivated me.

Was I fearful? Did I anticipate tragedy, or great suffering at this moment of setting forth? No. I was filled with desire, and thought I was ready for anything.