

SELECTED EARLY ENTRIES  
FROM KIERKEGAARD'S JOURNALS  
AND PAPERS

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The first two entries are ostensibly addressed to Peter Wilhelm Lund (1801–1880), brother of Johan Christian Lund and Henrik Ferdinand Lund (married to Kierkegaard's sisters Nicoline Christine and Petrea Severine). In 1833 he returned to Brazil to continue his work as a paleontologist. Emanuel Hirsch has made a case for regarding the two letters and many other entries from the same period as parts of Kierkegaard's first, but not completed, writing plan, a series of letters by a Faustian doubter. The two entries were written at the end of Kierkegaard's fifth year as a student at the University of Copenhagen. The third entry (see p.12 and note 2) is the most frequently and variously quoted line by Kierkegaard, and it does crystalize many elements of his outlook.

Copenhagen, June 1, 1835

**Y**OU KNOW how inspiring I once found it to listen to you and how enthusiastic I was about your description of your stay in Brazil, although not so much on account of the mass of detailed observations with which you have enriched yourself and your scholarly field as on account of the impression your first journey into that wondrous nature made upon you: your paradisiacal happiness and joy. Something like this is bound to find a sympathetic response in any person who has the least feeling and warmth, even though he seeks his satisfaction, his occupation, in an entirely different sphere, but especially so in a young person who as yet only dreams of his destiny. Our early youth is like a flower at dawn with a lovely dewdrop in its cup, harmoniously and pensively reflecting everything that surrounds it. But soon the sun rises over the horizon, and the dewdrop evaporates; with it vanish the fantasies of life, and now it becomes a question (to use a flower metaphor once more) whether or not a person is able to produce—by his own efforts as does the *oleander*—a drop that may represent the fruit of his life. This requires, above all, that one be allowed to grow in the soil where one really belongs, but that is not always so easy to find. In this respect there exist fortunate creatures who have such a decided inclination in a particular direction that they faithfully follow the path once it is laid out for them without ever falling prey to the thought that perhaps they ought to have followed an entirely different path. There are others who let themselves be influenced so completely by their surroundings that it never becomes clear to them in what direction they are really striving. Just as the former group has its own

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implicit categorical imperative, so the latter recognizes an explicit categorical imperative. But how few there are in the former group, and to the latter I do not wish to belong. Those who get to experience the real meaning of Hegelian dialectics in their lives are greater in number. Incidentally, it is altogether natural for wine to ferment before it becomes clear; nevertheless this process is often disagreeable in its several stages, although regarded in its totality it is of course agreeable, provided it does in the end yield its relative results in the context of the usual doubt. This is of major significance for anybody who has come to terms with his destiny by means of it, not only because of the calm that follows in contrast to the preceding storm, but because one then *has life* in a quite different sense than before. For many, it is this Faustian element that makes itself more or less applicable to every intellectual development, which is why it has always seemed to me that we should concede cosmic significance to the *Faust* concept. Just as our ancestors worshipped a goddess of yearning, so I think that Faust represents doubt personified. He need be no more than that, and Goethe probably sins against the concept when he permits Faust to convert, as does Mérimée when he permits Don Juan to convert. One cannot use the argument against me that Faust is taking a positive step at the instant he applies to the Devil, for right here, it seems to me, is one of the most significant elements in the Faust legend. He surrendered himself to the Devil for the express purpose of attaining enlightenment, and it follows that he was not in possession of it prior to this; and precisely because he surrendered himself to the Devil, his doubt increased (just as a sick person who falls into the hands of a medical quack usually gets sicker). For although Mephistopheles permitted him to look through his spectacles into humankind and into the secret hiding places of the earth, Faust must forever doubt him because of his inability to provide enlightenment about the most profound intellectual matters. In accordance with his own idea he could never turn to God because in the very instant he did so he would have to admit to himself that here in truth lay enlightenment; but in that same instant he would, in fact, have denied his character as one who doubts.

But such a doubt can also manifest itself in other spheres. Even though a person may have come to terms with a few of these main issues, life offers other significant questions. Naturally every person desires to work according to his abilities in this world, but it follows from this that he wishes to develop his abilities in a particular direction, namely, in that which is best suited to him as an individual. But which is that? Here I am confronted with a big question mark. Here I stand like Hercules—not at a crossroads—no, but at a multitude of roads, and therefore it is all the harder to choose the right one. Perhaps it is my misfortune in life that I am interested in far too many things rather than definitely in any one thing. My interests are not all subordinated to one but are all coordinate.

I shall attempt to show how matters look to me.

1. *The natural sciences*. (In this category I include all those who seek to explain and interpret the runic script of nature, ranging from him who calculates the speed of the stars and, so to speak, arrests them in order to study them more closely, to him who describes the physiology of a particular animal, from him who surveys the surface of the earth from the mountain peaks to him who descends to the depths of the abyss, from him who follows the development of the human body through its countless nuances to him who examines intestinal worms.) First, when I consider this whole scholarly field, I realize that on this path as well as on every other (but indeed primarily here) I have of course seen examples of men who have made names for themselves in the annals of scholarship by means of enormous diligence in collecting. They master a great wealth of details and have discovered many new ones, but no more than that. They have merely provided the substratum for the thought and elaboration of others. These men are content with their details, and yet to me they are like the rich farmer in the gospel; they have gathered great stores in their barn, yet science may declare to them: "Tomorrow I demand your life," inasmuch as it is that which determines the significance of each particular finding for the whole. To the extent that there is a sort of unconscious life in such a man's knowledge, the sciences may be said to demand his life, but to the extent that there is not, his activity is comparable to that of the man who nourishes the earth by the decay of his dead body. The case differs of course with respect to other phenomena, with respect to those scholars in the natural sciences who have found or have sought to find by their speculation that Archimedean point that does not exist in the world and who from this point have considered the totality and seen the component parts in their proper light. As far as they are concerned, I cannot deny that they have had a very salutary effect on me. The tranquillity, the harmony, the joy one finds in them is rarely found elsewhere. We have three worthy representatives here in town: an Ørsted, whose face has always seemed to me like a chord that nature has sounded in just the right way; a Schouw, who provides a study for the painter who wanted to paint Adam naming the animals; and finally, a Hornemann, who, conversant with every plant, stands like a patriarch in nature. In this connection, I also remember with pleasure the impression you made upon me as the representative of a great nature which also ought to be represented in the National Assembly. I have been and am still inspired by the natural sciences; and yet I do not think that I shall make them my principal field of study. By virtue of reason and freedom, life has always interested me most, and it has always been my desire to clarify and solve the riddle of life. The forty years in the desert before I could reach the promised land of the sciences seem too costly to me, and the more so as I believe that nature may also be observed from another side, which does not require insight into the

secrets of science. It matters not whether I contemplate the whole world in a single flower or listen to the many hints that nature offers about human life; whether I admire those daring designs in the firmament; or whether, upon hearing the sounds of nature in Ceylon, for example, I am reminded of the sounds of the spiritual world; or whether the departure of the migratory birds reminds me of the more profound yearnings of the human heart.

2. *Theology*. This seems to be what I have most clearly chosen for my own, yet there are great difficulties here as well. In Christianity itself there are contradictions so great that they prevent an unobstructed view, to a considerable extent, at any rate. As you know, I grew up in orthodoxy, so to speak. But from the moment I began to think for myself, the gigantic colossus began to totter. I call it a gigantic colossus advisedly, for taken as a whole it does have a good deal of consistency, and in the course of many centuries past, the component parts have become so tightly fused that it is difficult to come to terms with them. I might now agree with some of its specific points, but then these could only be considered like the seedlings one often finds growing in rock fissures. On the other hand, I might also see the inconsistencies in many specific points, but I would still have to let the main basis stand *in dubio* for some time. The instant *that* changed, the whole would of course assume an entirely different cast, and thus my attention is drawn to another phenomenon: rationalism, which by and large cuts a pretty poor figure. There is really nothing to object to in rationalism as long as reason consistently pursues its own end and—in rendering an explanation of the relation between God and the world—again comes to see humankind in its most profound and spiritual relation to God. In this respect, rationalism from its own point of view considers Christianity that which for many centuries has satisfied humankind's deepest need. But then it is in fact no longer rationalism, for rationalism is given its real coloring by Christianity. Hence it occupies a completely different sphere and does not constitute a system but a Noah's Ark (to adopt an expression Professor Heiberg used on another occasion), in which the clean and the unclean animals lie down side by side. It makes roughly the same impression as our Citizens' Volunteer Company of old would have made alongside the Royal Potsdam Guards. Therefore it attempts essentially to ally itself with Christianity, bases its arguments upon Scripture, and in advance of every single point dispatches a legion of Biblical quotations that in no way penetrate the argument. The rationalists behave like Cambyzes, who in his campaign against Egypt dispatched the sacred chickens and cats in advance of his army, but they are prepared, like the Roman Consul, to throw the sacred chickens overboard when they refuse to eat. The fallacy is that when they are in agreement with Scripture they use it as a basis, but otherwise not. Thus they adopt mutually exclusive points of view.

*Nonnulla desunt* [something missing].

As to minor discomforts I will merely say that I am now studying for my theological qualifying examinations, an occupation that holds no interest for me at all and that accordingly does not proceed with the greatest efficiency. I have always preferred the free and thus perhaps somewhat indefinite course of study to that service offered at a pre-set table where one knows in advance the guests one will meet and the food one will be served every single day of the week. Nevertheless, it is a necessity, and one is scarcely permitted out onto the scholarly commons without having been branded. In my present state of mind, I also consider it useful for me to do so and furthermore, I also know that in this way I can make Father very happy (for he thinks that the true land of Canaan lies beyond the theological qualifying examinations, but at the same time, as Moses once did, he climbs Mount Tabor and reports that I will never get in—but I do hope that his prophecy will not come true this time), so I suppose I must get to work. How fortunate you are to have found in Brazil a vast field of investigation where every step offers strange new objects and where the cries of the rest of the learned republic cannot disturb your peace. To me the learned theological world seems like Strandvej on a Sunday afternoon in the season when everybody goes to Bakken in Dyrehaven: they tear past each other, yell and scream, laugh and make fun of each other, drive their horses to death, overturn and are run over. Finally, when they reach Bakken covered with dust and out of breath—well, they look at each other—and go home.

As far as your returning is concerned, it would be childish of me to hasten it, as childish as when the mother of Achilles attempted to hide him in order that he might avoid a speedy honorable death.—Take care of yourself!—JPV 5092 (*Pap. I A 72*) June 1, 1835; *Letters*, Letter 3, KW XXV.

*Gilleleie, August 1, 1835*

AS I HAVE TRIED to show in the preceding pages, this is how things actually looked to me. But when I try to get clear about my life, everything looks different. Just as it takes a long time for a child to learn to distinguish itself from objects and thus for a long time disengages itself so little from its surroundings that it stresses the objective side and says, for example, "me hit the horse," so the same phenomenon is repeated in a higher spiritual sphere. I therefore believed that I would possibly achieve more tranquillity by taking another line of study, by directing my energies toward another goal. I might have succeeded for a time in banishing a certain restlessness, but it probably would have come back more intense, like a fever after drinking cold water.

What I really need is to get clear about *what I am to do*,\* not what I must know, except insofar as knowledge must precede every act. What matters is to find my purpose, to see what it really is that God wills that I shall do; the crucial thing is to find a truth that is truth *for me*,\*\* to find *the idea for which I am willing to live and die*. Of what use would it be to me to discover a so-called objective truth, to work through the philosophical systems so that I could, if asked, make critical judgments about them, could point out the fallacies in each system; of what use would it be to me to be able to develop a theory of the state, getting details from various sources and combining them into a whole, and constructing a world I did not live in but merely held up for others to see; of what use would it be to me to be able to formulate the meaning of Christianity, to be able to explain many specific points—if it had no deeper meaning *for me and for my life*? And the better I was at it, the more I saw others appropriate the creations of my mind, the more tragic my situation would be, not unlike that of parents who in their poverty are forced to send their children out into the world and turn them over to the care of others. Of what use would it be to me for truth to stand before me, cold and naked, not caring whether or not I acknowledged it, making me uneasy rather than trustingly receptive. I certainly do not deny that I still accept an *imperative of knowledge* and that through it men may be influenced, but *then it must come alive in me*, and *this* is what I now recognize as the most important of all. This is what my soul thirsts for as the African deserts thirst for water. This is what is lacking, and this is why I am like a man who has collected furniture, rented an apartment, but as yet has not found the beloved to share life's ups and downs with him. But in order to find that idea—or, to put it more correctly—to find myself, it does no good to plunge still further into the world. That was just what I did before. The reason I thought it would be good to throw myself into *law* was that I believed I could develop my keenness of mind in the many muddles and messes of life. Here, too, was offered a whole mass of details in which I could lose myself; here, perhaps, with the given facts, I could construct a totality, an organic view of criminal life, pursue it in all its dark aspects (here, too, a certain fraternity of spirit is very evident). I also wanted to become an *acteur* [actor] so that by putting myself in another's role I could, so to speak, find a substitute for my own life and by means of this external change find some diversion. This was what I needed to lead a *completely human life* and not merely one of *knowledge*, so that I could base the development of my thought not on—yes, not on something called objective—something that in any case is not my own, but upon something

\* How often, when a person believes that he has the best grip on himself, it turns out that he has embraced a cloud instead of Juno.

\*\* Only then does one have an inner experience, but how many there are who experience life's different impressions the way the sea sketches figures in the sand and then promptly erases them without a trace.

that is bound up with the deepest roots\* of my existence [*Existents*], through which I am, so to speak, grafted into the divine, to which I cling fast even though the whole world may collapse. *This is what I need, and this is what I strive for*. I find joy and refreshment in contemplating the great men who have found that precious stone for which they sell all, even their lives,\*\* whether I see them becoming vigorously engaged in life, confidently proceeding on their chosen course without vacillating, or discover them off the beaten path, absorbed in themselves and in working toward their high goal. I even honor and respect the bypath that lies so close by. It is this inward action of a person, this God-side of a person, that is decisive, not a mass of data, for the latter will no doubt follow and will not then appear as accidental aggregates or as a succession of details, one after the other, without a system, without a focal point where all the radii come together. I, too, have certainly looked for this focal point. I have vainly sought an anchor in the boundless sea of pleasure as well as in the depths of knowledge. I have felt the almost irresistible power with which one pleasure reaches a hand to the next; I have felt the counterfeit enthusiasm it is capable of producing. I have also felt the boredom, the shattering, which follows on its heels. I have tasted the fruits of the tree of knowledge and time and again have delighted in their savoriness. But this joy was only in the moment of cognition and did not leave a deeper mark on me. It seems to me that I have not drunk from the cup of wisdom but have fallen into it. I have sought to find the principle for my life through resignation [*Resignation*], by supposing that since everything proceeds according to inscrutable laws it could not be otherwise, by blunting my ambitions and the antennae of my vanity. Because I could not get everything to suit me, I abdicated with a consciousness of my own competence, somewhat the way decrepit clergymen resign with pension. What did I find? Not myself [*Jeg*], which is what I did seek to find in that way (I imagined my soul, if I may say so, as shut up in a box with a spring-lock, which external surroundings would release by pressing the spring).—Consequently the seeking and finding of the kingdom of heaven was the first thing to be resolved. But it is just as useless for a person to want first of all to decide the externals and after that the fundamentals as it is for a cosmic body, thinking to form itself, first of all to decide the nature of its surface, to what bodies it should turn its light, to which its dark side, without first letting the harmony of cen-

\* How close does man, despite all his knowledge, usually live to madness? What is truth but to live for an idea? When all is said and done, everything is based on a postulate; but not until it no longer stands outside him, not until he lives in it, does it cease to be a postulate for him. (Dialectic—Dispute)

\*\* Thus it will be easy for us once we receive that ball of yarn from Ariadne (love) and then go through all the mazes of the labyrinth (life) and kill the monster. But how many are there who plunge into life (the labyrinth) without taking that precaution (the young girls and the little boys who are sacrificed every year to Minotaurus)—?

trifugal and centripetal forces realize its existence [*Existents*] and letting the rest come of itself. One must first learn to know oneself before knowing anything else (γνώθι σεαυτόν). Not until a person has inwardly understood *himself* and then sees the course he is to take does his life gain peace and meaning; only then is he free of that irksome, sinister traveling companion—that irony of life\* that manifests itself in the sphere of knowledge and invites true knowing to begin with a not-knowing (Socrates),\*\* just as God created the world from nothing. But in the waters of morality it is especially at home to those who still have not entered the tradewinds of virtue. Here it tumbles a person about in a horrible way, for a time lets him feel happy and content in his resolve to go ahead along the right path, then hurls him into the abyss of despair. Often it lulls a person to sleep with the thought, “After all, things cannot be otherwise,” only to awaken him suddenly to a rigorous interrogation. Frequently it seems to let a veil of forgetfulness fall over the past, only to make every single trifle appear in a strong light again. When he struggles along the right path, rejoicing in having overcome temptation’s power, there may come at almost the same time, right on the heels of perfect victory, an apparently insignificant external circumstance that pushes him down, like Sisyphus, from the height of the crag. Often when a person has concentrated on something, a minor external circumstance arises that destroys everything. (As in the case of a man who, weary of life, is about to throw himself into the Thames and at the crucial moment is halted by the sting of a mosquito.) Frequently a person feels his very best when the illness is the worst, as in tuberculosis. In vain he tries to resist it, but he has not sufficient strength, and it is no help to him that he has gone through the same thing many times; the kind of practice acquired in this way does not apply here. Just as no one who has been taught a great deal about swimming is able to keep afloat in a storm, but only the person who is intensely convinced and has experienced that he is actually lighter than water, so a person who lacks this inward point of poise is unable to keep afloat in life’s storms.—Only when a person has understood himself in this way is he able to maintain an independent existence and thus avoid surrendering his own I. How often we see (in a period when we extol that Greek historian because he knows how to appropriate an unfamiliar style so delusively like the original author’s, instead of censuring him,

\* It may very well in a certain sense remain, but he is able to bear the squalls of this life, for the more a man lives for an idea, the more easily he comes to sit on the “wonder stool” before the whole world.—Frequently, when a person is most convinced that he has understood himself, he is assaulted by the uneasy feeling that he has really only learned someone else’s life by rote.

\*\* There is also a proverb that says: “One hears the truth from children and the insane.” Here it is certainly not a question of having truth according to premises and conclusions, but how often have not the words of a child or an insane person thundered at the man with whom penetrating discernment could accomplish nothing—?

since the first praise always goes to an author for having his own style—that is, a mode of expression and presentation qualified by his own individuality)—how often we see people who either out of mental-spiritual laziness live on the crumbs that fall from another’s table or for more egotistical reasons seek to identify themselves with others, until eventually they believe it all, just like the liar through frequent repetition of his stories. Although I am still far from this kind of interior understanding of myself, with profound respect for its significance I have sought to preserve my individuality—worshiped the unknown God. With a premature anxiety I have tried to avoid coming in close contact with the phenomena whose force of attraction might be too powerful for me. I have sought to appropriate much from them, studied their distinctive characteristics and meaning in human life, but at the same time guarded against coming, like the moth, too close to the flame. I have had little to win or to lose in association with the ordinary run of men, partly because what they did—so-called practical life\*—does not interest me much, partly because their coldness and indifference to the spiritual and deeper currents in man alienate me even more from them. With few exceptions my companions have had no special influence upon me. A life that has not arrived at clarity about itself must necessarily exhibit an uneven side-surface; confronted by certain facts [*facta*] and their apparent disharmony, they simply halted there, for they did not have sufficient interest in me to seek a resolution in a higher harmony or to recognize the necessity of it. Their opinion of me was always one-sided, and I have vacillated between putting too much or too little weight on what they said. I have now withdrawn from their influence and the potential variations of my life’s compass resulting from it. Thus I am again standing at the point where I must begin again in another way. I shall now calmly attempt to look at myself and begin to initiate inner action; for only thus will I be able, like a child calling itself “I” in its first consciously undertaken act, be able to call myself “I” in a profounder sense.

But that takes stamina, and it is not possible to harvest immediately what one has sown. I will remember that philosopher’s method of having his disciples keep silent for three years; then I dare say it will come. Just as one does not begin a feast at sunrise but at sundown, just so in the spiritual world one must first work forward for some time before the sun really shines for us and rises in all its glory; for although it is true as it says that God lets his sun shine upon the good and the evil and lets the rain fall on the just and the unjust, it is not so in the spiritual world. So let the die be cast—I am crossing the Rubicon! No doubt this road takes me *into battle*, but I will not renounce it.

\* This life, which is fairly prevalent in the whole era, is manifest also in big things; whereas the past ages built works before which the observer must stand in silence, now they build a tunnel under the Thames (utility and advantage). Yes, almost before a child gets time to admire the beauty of a plant or some animal, it asks: Of what use is it?

I will not lament the past—why lament? I will work energetically and not waste time in regrets, like the person stuck in a bog and first calculating how far he has sunk without recognizing that during the time he spends on that he is sinking still deeper. I will hurry along the path I have found and shout to everyone I meet: Do not look back as Lot's wife did, but remember that we are struggling up a hill.—JPV 5100 (*Pap. I A 75*) August 1, 1835

 Philosophy is perfectly right in saying that life must be understood backward. But then one forgets the other clause—that it must be lived forward. The more one thinks through this clause, the more one concludes that life in temporality never becomes properly understandable, simply because never at any time does one get perfect repose to take a stance—backward. —JP I 1030 (*Pap. IV A 164*) n.d., 1843