

"In order to study the ethical, every human being is assigned to himself."

X is for Existentialism: Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Sartre

Soren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) reacted violently against the type of detached rationalistic philosophical method created by Hegel. His starting point was the unique nature of the consciousness of each individual. Kierkegaard states that *'In order to study the ethical, every human being is assigned to himself'*. He sees 'subjective truth' as the 'highest' or most significant truth.

To Kierkegaard, human consciousness is a metaphysical dimension that itself requires investigation, and that also links one to God. It can only be understood or approached subjectively. One can approach this dimension of human existence by inwardness. He links inwardness with the inexplicable problem of how we can exist at all as self-aware persons. He states: *'All essential knowing pertains to existence'*. Kierkegaard was the predecessor of the existentialists as he holds consciousness and freedom to be the central elements of our nature.

Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) used the perspective of our sensation of consciousness as his foundation. He challenged the whole Western tradition of seeking objective knowledge of the world as if it were a complex external object. He starts not with our reason, but rather with the fact that we *exist*; that we find ourselves thrown into the world for no apparent reason, that we are conscious, self-defining embodied beings within our own specific physical, social, and historic context. Our psychological construction of an external objective world erroneously leads us to think of our existence as if we were some sort of complex object, but our self-enclosed self-awareness implies an unbridgeable gap between ourselves and the world, which has a different sort of existence. Philosophy is not primarily an academic pursuit, rather it is an exercise in understanding how we encounter ourselves within the world.

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) held that if knowledge exists within our consciousness logically prior to empirical science (which is a partial but successful system of knowledge-of-matter/energy) then how are we to approach the totality of knowing? Sartre was concerned with the nature and scope of human consciousness and human freedom. According to Sartre, we are not in a position to

make ultimate claims about the being of the world or for that matter about the way that things in the world are in themselves. We are only able to make with certainty claims about the way our consciousness experiences the world. Sartre made Heidegger's theories sexy by identifying them with the French Resistance and a touch of Marxism. He states that *'Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself'*.

Sartre compares living one's life to an artist painting a picture:

'Does anyone reproach an artist when he paints a picture for not following rules established a priori? Does one ever ask what is the picture that he ought to paint? As everyone knows, there is no pre-defined picture for him to make; the artist applies himself to the composition of a picture, and the picture that ought to be made is precisely that which he will have made.'

CPD further study and reflective notes

These notes will help you to read and reflect further on any of the brief articles in this series. If this learning relates to your professional development then you should put it in your annual PDP and claim self-certified CPD points within the RCGP guidelines set out at <http://bit.ly/UT5Z3V>.

If your reading and reflection is occasional and opportunistic, claims in this one area should not exceed 10 CPD credits per year. However, if you decide to use this material to develop your understanding of medical philosophy and ethics as a significant part of a PDP, say over 2 years, then a larger number of credits can be claimed so long as there is evidence of balance over a 5-year cycle. These credits should demonstrate the impact of your reflection on your practice (for example, by way of case studies or other evidence), and must be validated by your appraiser.

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Box 1. Reflective notes

- *'Does anyone reproach an artist ... for not following rules established a priori?... there is no pre-defined picture for him to make; the artist applies himself to the composition of a picture, and the picture that ought to be made is precisely that which he will have made.'* How could this apply to your life?

Box 2. Further reading

Primary source: Solomon R, Sherman D. *The Blackwell guide to continental philosophy*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2003.

Further study: Sartre J. *Existentialism and humanism*. Mairet P, tr. London: Methuen, 1973.