

Sartre and Black Existentialism

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I would love to have had a cup of coffee with Jean-Paul Sartre. Had I the opportunity, I would first thank him for his courage. He fought not only the anti-human forces of antisemitism and antiblack racism in French and American society, but also those vices within him that always offered the seduction of an easy way out. I also wonder if his academic and political critics of today could defend their values under the threats faced by him when he defended his. Think of the declaration of five thousand war veterans marching down the Champs-Élysée in 1960 chanting, “Kill Sartre!,” in response to his support of Algerian independence. Think of the death threats and assassination attempts by the Organisation de l’Armée Secrète (OAS), who bombed his apartment. Think of his refusal to tour the United States during the Vietnam war. And think of his rejection of the Nobel Prize for Literature on the avowed grounds of belonging to no institution.¹ He stood his ground, as best he could, which, for a human being, could not have been other than imperfect. Indeed that imperfection was at the heart of his committed atheism, which insisted that the human condition demanded that we face the world without God’s support.² His response was to live that condition, and beyond the many bad readings of his critique of social reality, to do so with concern for the lives of others. His understanding of the struggle for freedom and what it means to be historical while engaged in socially transformative projects was coterminous. This made him a constant ally of black existential thought and black liberation struggles throughout most of the twentieth century, since his emphasis on what it means to be a human being was a shared interest of people whose humanity has been denigrated in the modern world.

Sartre’s involvement with black existential philosophy was, however, not as an outsider. In my introduction to *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy*, I argued that black existential philosophy is not only existential philosophy produced by black philosophers.³ It is also thought that addresses the intersection of problems of existence in black contexts. It is in this sense that Sartre is also an insider to black existential philosophy.⁴ His interest in the condition of blacks was animated by concerns for freedom and an appreciation of black aesthetic production as a leitmotif of the modern world. The question of freedom for him was straightforward. Blacks are people, which means, from the perspective of his philosophy, that they are freedom. Their bondage and the subsequent institutional limitations imposed upon them by racism lead to an anti-social world, one committed to the eradication of freedom. It also leads to a form of suffering that is a function of *unfreedom*, where a free being is either repressed through violence or denies his or her freedom. The unfree include those paralyzed in their situation because of fear and anxiety over what the unknown offers, as well as the individuals who comfort themselves in the denial of other people’s freedom. . . .

1 These events are well known among Sartre scholars, but see

2 For discussion of Sartre’s “Religious Atheism,” see Sylvain Boni, *The Self and Other in the Ontologies of Sartre and Buber* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1987).

3 Lewis R. Gordon, “Introduction,” *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy*, ed. by Lewis R. Gordon (New York: Routledge, 1997).

4 We could, as well, add David Theo Goldberg, the famed theorist of race and racism, to this list. Goldberg, by the way, commenced his professional philosophical career with his dissertation, “The Philosophical Foundations of Racism” (New York: Graduate Center, City University of New York, 1985), a work which focused on Jean-Paul Sartre’s contributions to the subject.