

Critical thinkers - james cone and jean- paul sartre critical thinking examples

[Politics](#), [Communism](#)



Both the theologian James Cone and the existential philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre looked at the world and were unsatisfied with the status quo they experienced around them. This dissatisfaction led them to know ideas and perspectives with which to see the world. These ideas resonated with others, which gained them the notoriety they have today as important philosophical/theological figures. The Public Broadcasting service (PBS) did a profile of James Cone in its series “ This far by faith” which explains how the social and political tides at the time shaped his view of the world and his ideas for how he thought the world could be improved. Adam Kirsch, a writer for The Daily Beast did a similar profile of Jean-Paul Sartre in his review of a recently published collection of Sartre essays, *We Have Only This Life to Live.*”

The problem that Jean-Paul Sartre tried to solve was reconciling the issue of purpose outside of the context of religion. He was active at a time in France and Europe when Europe and France especially was moving away from the Christian religion that had controlled religiously and politically the region before. A secularized world though, still needed to find a purpose in a “ purposeless” existence and Sartre’s take on existentialism was an attempt to do just that. The title of the collection of essays that Kirsch reviews, *We Have Only This Life to Live*, is a nod to a basic tenet of Sartre’s philosophy. His influence was pervasive. Kirsch wrote “ it is hard for American readers to appreciate the kind of authority that Jean-Paul Sartre once enjoyed in France” (Kirsch, 2013). He was during his time, and remains today one of the largest figures not just of philosophy, but also of drama and fiction.

Jean-Paul was born at a time not just when religion was on the wane, but also

when communism was on the rise. A new political landscape was taking shape due to the rise of Marxist influenced communism. This influenced his thought process, and Kirsch believes that it caused a contradiction in his thinking. As an avid figure of his time, his opinions were sought on major issues and his thinking affected many people. He was not an ivory tower philosopher but an important opinion holder of the civil society. In 1944, fairly early on in his career, Sartre wrote, "man must create his own essence: it is in throwing himself into the world, suffering there, struggling there, that he gradually defines what this man is before he dies" (Kirsch, 2013). Sartre saw the meaninglessness in the world that people were associating with human existence and he rebelled against such notions. He believed that the meaning of people's lives were to give those lives meaning. He believed that that meaning was arbitrary, but once decided of grave import.

His thinking though ran into contradictions. Sartre supported communism, which was difficult to reconcile with the system of existentialism. Kirsch writes "starting in the mid-1940s, and increasingly over the next 10 years, Sartre begins to worship at another altar: the altar of Communism" (Kirsch, 2013). This ideology though was not one that fit well in the context of believing in individual freedom. Sartre lived at a time when communism was causing people to suffer and in some cases die as it took control of political systems of Russia and much of Eastern Europe. There is tension between his belief in the system of communism and his condemnation at acts of horror that were being done in its name.

Ultimately, his political philosophy is not as remembered or as influential as his existential philosophy, that meaning and purpose were chosen by the

individual. His ideas of communism were not implemented, as ideally as he had envisioned they would be. This led him to becoming rather jaded later in life, and he is often associated with a noir culture.

James Cone was active at a similar time as Jean-Paul Sartre and just like him saw his world rife with contradictions. For Sartre, these contradictions were how to reconcile a belief in no god with the search for meaning. For Cone, it was how to reconcile white racism and black marginalization with the Christian religion that he was taught. He said in an interview “ I was within inches of leaving the Christian faith, because that faith as I had received it and learned it no longer explained the world to me satisfactorily” (PBS, 2003). If it did not explain the world satisfactorily for him, one would wonder why he remained within the faith.

He was heavily influenced by Malcolm X, who was the first person who made him seriously question his theology. Malcolm X said that “ Christianity is a white man’s religion” and saw it as part of the problem. But Martin Luther King Jr., who was also a minister within a Christian denomination, also heavily influenced Cone.

Cone took a dramatic reinterpretation of Christianity, adding a subjective essence to it. To answer these questions, he arrived at the conclusion that theology is not universal, but tied to specific historical contexts. He then took that as a jumping off point to arrive at the conclusion that the “ Black theologian must reject any conception of God that stifles black self-determination by picturing God as a God of all peoples. Either God is identified with the oppressed to the point that their experience becomes God’s experience, or God is a God of racism” (Cone, 1977).

Theology at this time was considered universal and doctrine in many Christian religions. Where Cone could have taken a road out of the Christian viewpoint and ended up finding meaning outside of a theistic standpoint, he ended up staying within the context of Christianity and radically re-interpreting the meaning of theology. By attaching theologies of the past to the historical contexts happening at the time, he allowed for a way of older interpretations to be discarded for new and "better."

Each thinker seems to have been committed to their course of action because of their preconceived thoughts. Cone stays with Christianity, and chooses to reinterpret it rather than reject it. He could have just as likely been influential had his thinking led him to listen to Malcolm X and reject Christianity as a white religion. Sartre could have left his ideas of communism and existentialism once he saw communism playing out on a global stage. When he saw the harm it was doing, he found himself in contradiction of claiming that this was wrong, but also that it was necessary. Both thinkers might have come up with a more fresh take on things had they been able to work outside of the frameworks they had built.

References:

"James Cone." PBS. PBS, n. d. Web. 29 Mar. 2014. Kirsch, Adam. "How Jean-Paul Sartre's Existential Angst Got the Better of Him." The Daily Beast. Newsweek/Daily Beast, n. d. Web. 29 Mar. 2014. .