

**CONVERSATIONAL THINKING, LOGIC, AND THE
MAKING OF MEANING**

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Abstract

Conversational thinking has emerged in recent years out of the scholarly philosophical work centered in Calabar Nigeria and spread throughout Africa and elsewhere. I have previously had the pleasure of discussing some of the finer points of conversationalism with Jonathan O. Chimakonam in the journal *Confluence* and the journal's relaunch as the *Journal of World Philosophies*. (CHIMAKONAM 2015; JANZ 2016). Our discussion there centered on questions I raised earlier about the nature and limits of dialogue (JANZ 2015), as well as my work on philosophy and place in an African context (JANZ 2009). Our conversation, in other words, has a history, and I expect it will also have a future. It is a conversation that comes from different places. I am not an African, and I lay no claim to be able to represent African life. Therefore, the approach to philosophy I take is one of examining the conditions for the possibility of philosophy, and the barriers to being able to enact those conditions. This is why I write about place so much. The conditions for thinking in a place and about a place differ in different places, but also have some commonalities. And the barriers to thinking in and about place can be fairly clearly outlined. This is of relevance, I argue, in thinking Africa, not as a set of identities or a history but as a space of thought.

Keywords: Conversational thinking, logic, meaning-making, philosophy, Chimakonam

Introduction

It is this background that brings me into conversation with Chimakonam and others who are advancing conversational philosophy. In this round of conversation, I would like to mainly focus on his paper “On the System of Conversational Philosophy”, bringing in other recent works that explicate the nature of conversationalism as needed. My interest will be to put conversationalism itself in conversation with other currents of metaphilosophy, not to determine which is right and which is not, but to sharpen the focus and define questions that allow us to move forward. To do this, I want to examine three issues: logic, meaning, and conversation itself.

I have more than one goal in this. First, I would like to probe the use of these concepts within this approach to philosophy. Second, I would like to explore the question of whether conversationalism is meant to advance the way to philosophize in Africa and beyond, or a way to do so, and if it is the second, how it can coexist with other approaches. And third, I would like to ask how this approach is African (or, indeed, whether it needs to be seen as such). I will return to these questions at the end of this piece once we have considered these central concepts.

On Logic

Conversationalism is rooted in a trivalent approach to logic, one which pushes the edges of Aristotelean alethic logic common in the West. There are other trivalent logics in existence. There are even logics that have more value states than that – Jain logic has up to seven, for instance (BURCH 1964). In almost all other cases, the reason for having more than two values is that bivalence does not adequately capture reality. Often, values over two indicate other levels of truth than “True” and “False” – something like “Makes no sense” or “not yet known”. These are features of the world, not features of one’s epistemology (for a survey of multivalent and non-classical logics that precede the emergence of Ezumezu logic, see Graham PRIEST 2008).

In Ezumezu logic, trivalence seems to chiefly be about bringing context into the picture. It embeds logic in experience. Bivalent logic handles this in part with the distinction between **validity and soundness**. Validity is about the structure of the reasoning, while soundness is about the reasonableness of the

premises, which amounts to the real-world context of the logic. We can have a valid argument about ridiculous things, but a sound argument needs to be about this world.

But the validity/soundness distinction does not address everything that Ezumezu is trying to do. It is not just a structural logic, but a method and the basis for a philosophical approach. Chimakonam's treatment in his book-length study (CHIMAKONAM 2019) is unusual, in that there is relatively little formalization compared to other logic texts, even in the chapter on Ezumezu as a formal system (chapter 8). It is, as the title of chapter 6 says, a "philosophy of African logic", which I take to be different from a logic in the sense of a formalized structure. This is an important distinction because it gets to the heart of what Ezumezu is trying to accomplish. It is not just an alternative way of representing the formal structure of reality. It is, rather, an attempt to get at what logic does in the human world, not a "theory of meaning, but a theory of meaning-making or meaning-formation." (CHIMAKONAM 2021, 17). We will address the questions around meaning more directly shortly, but what is important here is that the point of recasting formal reasoning is to accomplish a task that has not adequately been accomplished with bivalent logic.

What Ezumezu does have in common with most other logics is propositionality. Logic must work with truth values, and that means identifying the truth or falsity of propositions. These are properties of those propositions, which means that at some level there is an ontology in which these propositions have a kind of reality to them (this is, of course, an aspect of an argument that goes far back in European philosophy, to the debate about universals in the Middle Ages). Multivalent logic often bends or blurs these properties by suggesting that there is fuzziness at the edges of propositions.

But there is an entirely different question we might ask than the question of what the values in logic mean beyond the familiar two values of true and false. We might instead ask about propositionality itself. Erotetic logic, that is, the logic of questions (for examples of this, we can look back to PRIOR & PRIOR 1955, and for more recent examples see: KORALUS & MASCARENHAS 2013; KORALUS 2014; WIŚNIEWSKI 2014), is one way to approach this without rejecting the idea that propositions are useful at least some of the time. This is a logic that has been explored in a variety of areas, and one

that anchors logic in the world by examining the adequacy of the questions we have about the world. Questions are non-alethic, that is, they do not hold truth values in themselves (although there are those who argue that they can be translated into truth-bearing propositions). If we resist that translation, though, we see that there are other entities in the logical universe than propositions that bear truth values.

So, is there a place for non-propositionality within Ezumezu, or must the starting point always be propositions? These are mental contents, and I think this assumes a kind of cognitive science that we might also talk about. To represent is, in a way, to stand back from the contents of knowledge. That might be fine for some knowledge, but Ezumezu logic proposes to get closer to context and experience. Do representationalism and propositionalism in themselves stand as a barrier to accessing the experience of real people? And is it possible that another form of logic such as erotetic logic could help to address the limitations of propositional logic? The goal of Ezumezu logic is to ground conversationalism. A logic of questions seems like a necessary part of this, if we are not to simply get into the situation of logic being used to determine who is right and who is wrong, and thus ironically shutting down the very conversation that is desired.

This can perhaps be seen by using the example that Chimakonam uses, the example of the claim “you need to drink water to stay alive.” (21ff). Strictly speaking, this is not a question of logic but epistemology, in other words, there is no reasoning happening (because no inferences are being made), but rather a determination of the truth conditions of a proposition. Under what conditions do we regard this statement as true? We might be inclined to think it is something like a necessary truth for humans, but then we are faced with several linguistic and definitional issues. Chimakonam contextualizes the statement so that it is true for someone in the Sahara but not true for someone drowning in the Niger River. But from the point of view of the epistemology of the claim, we could also see this as having some vague or indefinite terms. Does someone need to drink water to stay alive? Probably not; we could imagine a scenario in which water is provided intravenously, and no drinking is needed. Is the statement one of situational specificity or general biological necessity? If it is the first, Chimakonam is correct to see variation based on who “you” might be, and what the circumstances are; if it is the second, it seems that he is not correct – the biological being still

needs water to survive as a biological being, whether or not the immediate circumstances dictate that the water is needed now.

So, would everything be cleared up if we did what natural-language analytic philosophers want to do, and clarify the words and the sense so that these ambiguities disappear? And would Chimakonam's approach to logic survive if we were rigorous about these natural-language precisions? This is where I think the possibility of logic that does not start from propositionality becomes significant. The goal is, after all, to get to meaning-making. We could re-imagine the example as the answer to a question, perhaps one as simple as "what does a human being require to stay alive?" That question would of course not be adequate to the answer given, since "water" is a necessary but not sufficient component.

But more importantly, we might realize that any question we ask, to which that claim is an answer, is a limited question because it leaves implicit some important issue that we want to know about. If I am standing on the bank of the Niger and see someone drowning and ask them "What do you need?", I expect that if they gave the answer in this example, "you need to drink water to stay alive!", I would regard them as having lost touch with reality, even though their answer would be true.

In an earlier essay, which was on Emmanuel Eze's final book *On Reason* (JANZ 2008; EZE 2008), I gave the example of witnessing a car accident at a street corner and being asked about it by a police officer (JANZ 2008, 305ff). I suggested that there could be several correct and complete but incommensurable answers to the question "what happened here?". These answers came from the deployment of different forms of reason, organized by our universally human but culturally inflected faculty of rationality. There were conversations between people with different positions on things but also with different ways of deploying or organizing the tools of reason, and there was also what I called a "forensic" function, which was the ability to move between these complete and consistent but incommensurable accounts.

The point is that the single question asked by the police officer actually disguised several subtly different questions, and indeed might have focused attention on one space of conversation while covering over another. Clearly, an officer at an accident scene wants a particular kind of information, and some responses, while legitimately true, are

also irrelevant and even insulting to the officer. In the same way, it is worth asking what the question is, to which “you need to drink water to stay alive” could be an answer. And perhaps, in order to actually have a conversation, what needs to be established is not a new logic of propositions, but a new logic of questions.

One of the many reasons it is so unfortunate that Emmanuel Eze passed away when he did, was that he missed the opportunity to see the rise of conversationalism and comment on it. I suspect the conversation between the Eze of his final book and the Chimakonam of this contemporary movement would have been fascinating. I do hope that in Eze’s absence, Chimakonam and others will take up that conversation.

On Meaning

So, the goal with much of what we have in conversationalism seems to be the establishment of meaning. It is clear that meaning is not given but earned, and that it requires a procedure to be arrived at, at least in a structured manner.

I’m wondering, though, whether this doesn’t give meaning enough credit. There’s an old, and probably overstated, distinction between analytic and continental philosophy, which is that in analytic philosophy truth comes before meaning, while in continental philosophy meaning comes before truth. So even though I’m happy to work in both spaces (and many others), let me make the case for the continental idea of meaning for a moment. This is not intended to invalidate the conversationalist enterprise but broaden it.

If meaning comes before truth, that would mean that we always find ourselves in a world that is already meaningful. In other words, we don’t decide first what is true and then assign it significance, but we move through the world in a pre-conscious manner as if things already have meaning. By meaning, we mean that they have symbolic and consequential standing in our worlds. We are born into a world where we have minimal epistemological ability, but in which we already have reactions to the world, impulses for food, ways of communicating happiness, frustration and pain. As we grow, we don’t assemble a mental world first, but we experience the world. Our meanings are sometimes conscious, but most often just matters of practice.

Conversationalism as Chimakonam describes it assumes that meaning is internal and personal. It is private. We hold meanings, but we cannot be sure that what we hold is the same as what others hold. And so, we have to make shared meanings, and this is a task rather than a presumption we can make. The question, though, is whether meanings are first internal and impossible to know, and/or whether they align with others. This seems like an assertion rather than a position demonstrated. It is just as possible that we are first social beings, holding meanings within our shared experience. One might, in fact, read Ubuntu in these terms, as shared meaning that stretches back in time and is represented through figures like ancestors and spirits.

So, the problem might not be that of shared meaning, but individual meaning. In fact, conversationalism might already have a commitment to a world in which meaning already exists and is handed down, making possible the formulation of propositions at all, rather than a world in which meaning is created through conversation. Is it not possible that we are both creating meaning and discovering existing meaning, the meaning we share as part of our cognitive development that makes it possible for us to have community at all as a primordial form of being human? If this is true, then the ties between conversationalism and hermeneutics might be stronger than it seems.

One more question on meaning – conversationalism assumes a kind of second-person engagement, but without the second-person logic that one finds in someone like Martin Buber. Buber tells us that the I of the I-Thou is not the same as the I of the I-It. In other words, in a dialogical relationship, the relationship comes before the poles, not the other way around. But in conversationalism, it seems that the poles come before the relationship. We have beings with integrity, inner lives, a full set of beliefs, and then in conversation those are confirmed or not, challenged or not, and then the beliefs change. In other words, beliefs seem like properties of the mind, and the logic of conversationalism is about having a method to efficiently develop and change those beliefs. So, it seems then that there's another ontological step, which is to ask about the beings who hold those beliefs. They seem prior to the entire method. Are they? Or are they affected at a fundamental level?

There is another example of an interaction that might shed some light on conversationalism (and indeed, I would like to see a conversation between conversationalism and this tradition): the

Japanese tradition of nondualism as represented in several figures. A recent book by David Johnson on Watsuji Tetsuro book *Fu-do*, translated as *Climate and Culture* (JOHNSON 2019; WATSUJI 1988) suggests a version of nondualism that seems to be trying to accomplish some of the same things as conversationalism is.

The point is not that conversationalism is wrong about the view that meaning is a task. It surely is that, and the mechanisms of meaning-making rooted in African culture are plausible. It is just not clear to me that this description for meaning is complete. And, if the communal or the shared is a fundamental part of being human (as I think much of African philosophy correctly points out), then the existence of meaning must be something more than simply its production using the tools and methods described.

On Conversation

Heidegger, in his essay “Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry” quotes the poet as saying, “We have been a conversation”. He meant by that that we reveal ourselves in relation to others, not just by introspecting or by figuring out some sort of first principles. Despite seeming to build in relationality to his philosophy, though, it could be argued that Heidegger placed considerably more emphasis on the individual as one coming to recognize his/her own authenticity within a fundamental ontology, than the dependency of the individual on any real conversation with others. It was left to Gadamer and many others to develop that.

Heidegger is worth mentioning here because it is an example of someone who claims conversation as a fundamental aspect of ontology and of philosophy, and yet we are left wondering just what it means. Conversationalism is not Heideggerian ontology (it is not even close), but this question arises here as well.

So, in conversationalism, how do we know that conversation is actually happening? There is a logic presented which is a method for dealing with a conversation that actually is happening, but there are things that look like conversations that are not conversations. In the US today, we are talking past each other about all sorts of things. Words are being used by people on all sides, and they are ostensibly about the same topic (e.g., race), but there is little or no actual conversation. This is not limited to the American scene.

Now, an exchange might create meaning, even if it is not actually a conversation. We could totally misunderstand each other, but in doing so create our own meaningful spaces which have a kind of integrity to them. In that case, conversations of a sort are necessary, but understanding is not.

In an earlier exchange (JANZ 2016) I asked Chimakonam to expand the discussion about the nature of conversations, particularly along the lines of accounting for the nature of actual exchanges and how they might operate. I noted that there have been plenty of exchanges that we might call conversations within African philosophy, but that these are clearly not what he is advocating. Even if conversationalism's sense of conversation is more specific and more dependent on particular kinds of exchange, though, there should still be a way of accounting for how these things would actually happen, how we would know that they are happening, how we would be able to recognize counterfeits, and how we could see these as situations of mutual learning rather than as just an opportunity to compare positions on things and potentially convert someone else to one's own position.

What we see in Chimakonam (2021) tends to focus more on the ways that we have of assessing claims within conversations than the mechanics of the conversation or the social exchange happening that becomes the context for meaning production. As noted earlier, truth and meaning have often had a relationship of tension with each other and are at least not the same thing. Assessing truth claims of propositions, whether done using two-valued logic or other forms such as Ezumezu logic, are a different project from determining or laying the foundation for meaning and meaning production, however we might want to define it. So, the framework for conversationalism could be helped by addressing a central issue, which is this: What is conversationalism an answer to? Or, alternatively, what problem does it solve (these are not the same question – answering questions and solving problems are different procedures)?

This central issue should not be taken to suggest that the given (i.e., Western) approach to meaning production is adequate until proven otherwise. Two-valued logic is not true by default. To use an analogy, as was the case with the advent of non-Euclidean geometries in the 19th century, Euclid (and by extension, Newton) adequately described motion and interaction within a particular definition of physical space. But once that definition of physical space became

inadequate to account for the very large (e.g., the cosmic), the very fast (e.g., anything approaching the speed of light) and the very small (e.g., the sub-atomic), it also became apparent that Euclidean geometry was inadequate as a model. It was not wrong, it was correct, but within a set of assumptions. What led thinkers such as Lobachevsky, Bolyai, and Reimann to formulate such innovations was the longstanding unease that mathematicians felt towards Euclid's fifth postulate, known as the parallel postulate. It betrayed an assumption, not realized until the 19th century, that geometry was assumed to happen on planar surfaces, and three-dimensional space obeyed the same rules as planes. Once the fifth postulate was seen as contingent upon that assumption and thus regarded as specific only to that situation, what came to be known as hyperbolic or elliptical geometry could be developed. And, while this might only have been of academic interest at the beginning, once Einstein started to conceive of space as curved, it was clear that this non-Euclidean geometry had an application in the real world.

And this is what I see conversationalism doing as well. Chimakonam formulates three supplementary laws of Ezumezu logic (supplementary to the classic laws of logic): Njikoka, Nmekoka, and Onona-etiti (CHIMAKONAM 2021, 25). In each case, the supplement is about context. In each case, there is an implicit claim being made that there is an aspect of human experience being left out of existing systems of logic. And indeed, as with non-Euclidean geometries, the change of focus opens up forms of meaning production which, while not limited to African contexts, become apparent when we understand the limitations of using two-valued logic to try to make sense out of African life. This is not an African logic any more than hyperbolic geometry is a German or a Polish geometry.

So, the schematic reasons for positing a logic make some sense. What would be useful would be to see just what it was in African culture that suggested that something was missing from the colonial instruction in logic. It is tempting to say that this simply reflects African language or culture, but so might other things. A mistake of some versions of ethnophilosophy is to identify one ontology as necessary in African settings, as if to be African means to hold that ontology. Similarly, with logic in particular and conversationalism in general, it is not that there is an approach to logic

or meaning production that Africans must necessarily hold, but that there is an approach afforded by African experience, one which is made available in part by the tension between colonial instruction in logic and African experience.

In other words, there is nothing about the logic itself that restricts its application to African culture or experience, even if it becomes apparent because of that experience. And, perhaps more provocatively, there is nothing that requires African thinkers to use Ezumezu logic or conversationalism in order to be truly or authentically African.

So, what is conversationalism, then? Is it a method of thought? Is it akin to dialectic? Is it prescriptive or descriptive? Is it a set of conditions for the possibility of meaning, that is, without this process in some sense whatever we think is meaning really is not? Chimakonam compares conversationalism to analytic philosophy, in that both “want to break down the whole into parts so as to understand the whole in terms of the parts”. Conversationalism adds to this that it constitutes “parts into a whole so as to understand the parts in terms of the whole” (CHIMAKONAM 2021, 35). What is not said here is that analytic philosophy’s ultimate goal is to assess propositions for their truth and reliability. The pursuit is truth, not meaning, which raises the question of how conversationalism is supposed to be meaning producing. It also raises the question of whether, in the end, conversationalism’s goal is to determine who is right and who is wrong based on the propositions they hold. Every move that it makes to distance itself from analytic philosophy seems to be an attempt to distance itself from those divisive and prescriptive implications, and yet, it is hard to see how they disappear entirely.

There is a response to this line of reasoning, which is that language is a necessary but not sufficient condition of meaning. Chimakonam argues as much in what he calls the “doctrinal dimension”. Put briefly, meaning does not lie in words or signifiers but is a product of conversation, which includes words and signifiers but also more than that. Deconstruction follows a similar path, in its emphasis on both the destabilization of structures of meaning as well as the opening up of new possibilities for meaning production.

We can see how some of this works out in the discussion of hermeneutics in Chimakonam (2021), near the end of the paper. Chimakonam draws some parallels between hermeneutics and

conversationalism, and also some contrasts. It is here that some of the tensions between how meaning is conceived in conversationalism and how it is conceived in hermeneutics (and for that matter, in deconstruction) become apparent.

It starts from the assumptions in conversationalism about what conversation is. Perhaps ironically, conversationalism is what I would describe as an individualist theory. The contrast here is to something like relationality or nondualism. In other words, conversationalism assumes that we start from individual action, and the problem to be solved is how interaction takes place. Interaction is the space of meaning-making, and the difficulty is to describe what happens when communication happens.

Chimakonam reads the history of hermeneutics in these terms, as the problem of communication, specifically through texts. There is another possibility, which is that meaning pre-exists truth, and connection pre-exists individuality. We see this in Ubuntu – I am because we are – and we also see it in the nondualism of Buddhism and in a different manner in Martin Buber. I would argue that in a different sense again, we see it in hermeneutics.

We could unpack each of these, but I will focus on hermeneutics since it receives attention from Chimakonam. While the problem of hermeneutics as described by people like Schleiermacher might have been the question of how religious texts can continue to have authority long after the context of their production has changed. The history of the development of hermeneutics in the West has been the history of an ever-expanding concept of text, from the Bible to religious texts to any texts at all, to the social world as a text, to the self as a text. By the time we think of ourselves as texts, we are also (to quote Ricoeur) thinking about the hermeneutics of suspicion as well as the hermeneutics of trust, that is the idea that the producer of the text might be trying to hide meaning from us, not communicate it to us. To the extent that we are texts that we ourselves both write and read, we are also unreliable narrators and partially skilled readers. We get ourselves wrong all the time.

So, the project of 20th century hermeneutics was largely to understand the task of living as self-texts. We hide ourselves from ourselves, we systematically deceive ourselves, but not all the time. How do we deal with that? In part, through our encounters with others. We might systematically misunderstand ourselves, but that is not a

fatal or permanent condition, as we can open ourselves to see our own blind spots, our own prejudices (to use Gadamer's term), when we encounter others. The task is not just to understand the other who we encounter, it is to understand ourselves in that encounter. If I meet someone and make a silly statement or ask a dumb question, I have learned something about myself. I have learned about my own assumptions, perhaps even those that I didn't know I had.

Is this conversation? Is it dialogue? Is it encounter? Each of these might have different inflections. If, like the tradition of conversationalism, we reserve that term for exchanges that begin with the self-contained individual who embarks on an interchange with others, we still have the question of where that individual comes from, what the antecedent conditions are for that individual's ability to even operate within a social world, and the individual's ability to tell the difference between meaning and randomness.

This is why misunderstanding is incomprehensible in conversationalism (CHIMAKONAM 2021, 44), but central in hermeneutics. If you start from the assumption of individualism, it makes sense that misunderstanding cannot lead to meaning-making. As Chimakonam says, "either you understand or you don't." But hermeneutics does not depend on this bivalent logic. It has, in effect, a third term, because misunderstanding is neither getting it right nor getting it wrong. And, it is not a third indefinite term, one which suspends judgment. It is, rather, a term dependent on a kind of nondualism, a recognition that the individual is nothing without the context in which he or she exists. And, the only way to recognize the meaning that already exists is to be mistaken about it, because that is the only way to show our position within social space (or for that matter, in the natural world, but that is another discussion). We show our position through misunderstanding because it is only when we juxtapose our own sense of certainty in ourselves with a world that does not bear that certainty out, that we are faced with asking a new question about ourselves. It is, in the end, the logic of the question, as was discussed earlier.

And so, this is the place I end up in when considering the promise of conversationalism. There is a version of the logic of questions, of the recognition of existing meaning, and of the nondualism in which the self can discover new possibilities, that can also be found within African spaces of thought. This realization does

not invalidate conversationalism; perhaps it does no more than make African philosophy into a true space of thought, expansive enough to contain fundamentally different approaches to the self, meaning, and the social world. And that can only be a healthy recognition.

Answering the questions

In the introduction, I asked three questions, that I think we can now ask and respond to more clearly.

(1) I believe that what has come already addresses the first question I asked. These concepts, at least the concepts of logic, meaning, and conversation, have some complexities which make conversationalism interesting as a space of thought. If it is regarded as a reliable method of thought, one would want to pin these concepts down to a single meaning. But in a space of thought, we can raise the question of what non-propositional logic might contribute (i.e., erotetic logic). We can raise the question of what it might mean for meaning to be the space in which propositions exist, rather than something that comes after the determination of the truth or reliability of those propositions. And we can raise the question of how conversation itself could actually exist both with the assumptions of individualism and without those assumptions (which raise the issue of how misunderstanding might figure in the process of meaning-making, by making it possible to destabilize the individual as a guarantee of the integrity of thought.

(2) These distinctions in basic concepts lead us to the second question posed at the beginning, which is whether conversationalism is meant to advance the way to philosophize in Africa and beyond, or a way to do so, and if it is the second, how it can coexist with other approaches. One of the effects of trying to answer a non-African question (as I argued in JANZ 2009), which is “Is there an African philosophy?”, was the impulse to try to find a single or best candidate that would then be regarded as the African philosophy. This was implicitly the case with early versions of negritude, which held that Western reasoning was dialectical and African reason was emotional. Once that distinction has been made, then anything that looks like logical deduction also looks like it was imported from somewhere else. Similarly, some versions of ethnophilosophy (e.g., Tempels, Mbiti)

can be read as having found a particular version of philosophy that was embedded in language and therefore extended as far as the language did. “I am because we are” became more than one touchstone for African thought, it became African philosophy itself.

Conversationalism is clearly not falling into this mistake at the level of content. The whole point is to have conversations between people with differing ideas and to achieve new forms of meaning in so doing. But how about at the metaphilosophical level? Is conversationalism being proposed as the authentic African philosophy?

I think that is not a necessary position to take, but it is tempting to take it. After all, Oruka’s four (later six) Trends of African Philosophy were more than just an attempt to provide a taxonomy of different ways of thinking. They were an attempt to sift the truest of African philosophy from those intellectual practices which were less African or less philosophical for some reason. Oruka accepted Hountondji’s criticisms of ethnophilosophy, and so that trend never was treated as a viable contender for the most authentic African philosophy. Nationalistic/ideological philosophy was philosophy often done by politicians and public figures and had as its goal bringing new nations together and defining forms of life. So, that was not exactly African philosophy, because those writing it were not really trained as philosophers. Professional philosophy was a kind of grab-bag of activities that did not require a specific object of thought. What was left, as the most authentic, was Oruka’s own project of sage philosophy.

So, we could see conversationalism as just the latest in the line of proposals for ways of doing African philosophy, which aspires to answer the question of what is truly African and truly philosophical. Except that it does not really attempt to answer the first of those questions at all. In this it is a little like Emmanuel Eze’s *On Reason*. (EZE 2008) Eze never claimed that his analysis of reason was only applicable to African forms of reason. What he claimed was that there were tools of reason, organized by our rationality, and our rationality was bound up in culture, among other things. Everyone has all the forms of reason, but the way they are deployed might differ, based on a number of factors (including, possibly, race or geography, but not limited to those). There was no attempt to look for something that could truly be seen as African.

Likewise, conversationalism uses terms and intellectual moves rooted in African (specifically Nigerian) cultures, but there is no sense that this is presented as African philosophy the way that negritude (or for that matter, sage philosophy) is. This is a strength, I believe, as it moves from identifying some exclusive form of reason or thought to recognizing a body of experience and a history that has a perspective, which has been ignored or suppressed, but which nevertheless has use.

(3) The third question from the introduction is one we have already broached: how is conversationalism African (or does it need to be)? It is worth noting that conversationalism is rooted in logic, and not a version of logic that is “ethnologic”, whatever that might mean. In other words, one does not need a particular set of cultural or linguistic experiences for conversationalism to be seen as useful in philosophy. The three-valued logic is, as Chimakonam describes, different from those that emphasize a state of uncertainty as a third option. But as I have argued, if we are to root conversation in the world of humans, we will have to take into account that that world is always already a world of meaning, one which we can be mistaken about, one which we share with others, and one which we discover both as individuals and as groups.

Conclusion

I hope it is clear that I think conversationalism brings a fresh and interesting new approach to the discussion of logic, meaning, and conversation itself. In each case, I hope to have asked some questions that might lead to a strengthening of this approach, and what conversationalism truly desires – a productive conversation.

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