

A STRANGE CONVERSATION
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Abstract

Jonathan Chimakonam's advocacy of conversational thinking has taken African philosophy by storm. It is not an exaggeration to say that no one working in African philosophy, today, can say they are unaware of the so-called Conversational Society of Philosophy (CSP). Equally, I doubt if anyone working in the field could ever say they are not aware of the name Johnathan Chimakonam. His courageous effort to advance a particular form of thinking in the African philosophical tradition is a welcome innovation. While I admire his efforts, I remain unconvinced by some of his claims. Two important claims will be the target of my discussion. The first is his insistence on using very strange language in the pursuit of a conversation. The second is his insistence that his methodology is different from other forms of philosophizing.

Keywords: Conversational thinking, philosophy, Chimakonam, metaphysics of absence, meaning

From my days as an undergraduate, I was annoyed by a particular type of philosopher. At the beginning of my initiation into philosophy, I quickly noticed that there were philosophers who had a liking for inventing words and phrases that struck me as odd. They would then offer lengthy explanations for what those words meant. In the end, I always found things seriously obscured by such moves and I am afraid I still do. The philosophers I liked were ones that used words in as simple ways as possible. They maintained a philosophical posture within simple and everyday language. I am afraid Chimakonam falls in the former category. My attention will, therefore, firstly address his unusual usage of language and concepts in an effort to invent something extraordinary that is supposed to be in the service of his

conversational agenda. I view his move to go against the spirit of conversation.

Chimakonam's starting point is incontrovertible and quite unoriginal. He states that "[T]he ultimate goal of philosophy should be meaning-making, and conversation is a relational process for meaning-making or meaning-formation! It is a theory of meaning-making" (CHIMAKONAM 2021, 6). He refers to meaning-making as an attempt, through creative struggle, "to create presence from the metaphysics of absence and to demonstrate their complementarity as equal binaries" (CHIMAKONAM 2021, 6). He then describes his version of metaphysics of absence as follows: "All meanings, and all meaningful propositions, have their source in the metaphysics of absence. But metaphysics of absence is only a characterization of the entity itself" (CHIMAKONAM 2021, 7). He claims to have described this entity as "okwu" which signifies rawness or formlessness. It is from this category that basic words are formed. Chimakonam then issues a footnote, which is supposed to distinguish his theory from Derrida's metaphysics of presence.

I find this starting point to be a bit puzzling for two reasons. Firstly, I never really get what metaphysics of absence is supposed to mean. Especially when connected to the explanation that Chimakonam gives. He says that the metaphysics of absence refers to some entity "okwu", it is from this entity that all things have a certain rawness to them that they begin to be shaped and eventually take the form they do, as I understand it. If that is the case, I could say there is very little to dispute about that claim. It could be the case that at some historical point, humans were in a state of "okwu" or it could be that they passed through that state at some stage. But why would Chimakonam describe it as metaphysics of absence? It appears as if Chimakonam wants to identify that instance as the beginning of the fashioning of reality or ideas. However, why call such a state metaphysics of absence? Is this description the best to capture what Chimakonam describes? Does it succeed in reflecting what he describes? I do not think that it does. I would suggest that Chimakonam's description and naming of that description is a commitment to some version of metaphysics that sees the world or things in the world as dependent on what we humans say or claim about them. At the beginning or at whatever stage, there is a certain "absence", which has to be filled. The ones doing the filling are

humans. They do so by meaning-making, by forming words for things and attaching certain meanings to moves they make, at least in the world of ideas and language. They are responsible for creating this reality. I can imagine a rival version of metaphysics holding an opposite view. That view would be that humans are part of the reality of the world. They do not come into a state characterized by a metaphysics of absence. On the contrary, metaphysics is already out there, or more precisely in that world and beyond. What humans have to do is process whatever they can to access the reality that is there. Metaphysics of absence is a very unusual term. A question we could ask is whether this term advances conversations. I suggest that it does not. The reason for my position is that the term itself, deliberately, sounds contradictory. And it is in that contradiction that Chimakonam seeks to popularize conversational thinking. Yet when the term is explained, it simply amounts to a certain commitment in metaphysics. Is that commitment really a metaphysics of absence? I do not think it is. While I admit that humans are involved in meaning-making and meaning-formation, I do not think that meaning-making and meaning-formation mean that humans are creators from an absence. There is never such a proper point of beginning where there was nothing either in language or thought to represent rawness. Humans have always had something to work with in the process of meaning-making. Humans are after all a part of a given world. Since they are part of that given world, the best they can do is to respond to that world in ways that make sense to them. That way of responding in sense-making ways is not a result of metaphysics of absence or a reflection of such a metaphysics. The term cannot be rescued by the explanation Chimakonam accords it. The biggest problem is that the term requires an exceptional explanation. When the explanation is given, it does not match the term, at least in my reading. I find this not to aid conversation since there is a presence of strange references and very strange usage of terms. This usage may lead us to absurdities and to the dark crevices of meaninglessness.

The second issue is about conversational philosophy's central claim about what it is all about. Chimakonam identifies ideas as "raw materials for meaning-making" (CHIMAKONAM 2021, 33). Further, he claims that there are no facts as facts are always changing. "The goal of conversation is to make meaning. Meaning is an individual's appreciation of an idea, which approximates the appreciation of the

significist who conveyed the idea. The aim of the conversationalists is to sustain the process of meaning-making while their goal is to make-meaning!” (CHIMAKONAM 2021, 33). If this is what conversational thinking is about, then I am led to think that it is not distinct from what philosophy has always been about. Even the pretentious universalist thesis was about meaning-making. Where they got things wrong was their belief that whatever they had to say could be generalized to everyone everywhere. In that miscalculation, they saw those who were unable to live to their standard to be not quite human. African philosophy, generally, has been about countering that erroneous belief. Generations of African philosophers have been engaged in the business of meaning-making from the perspective of Africans. A great example of this position is to be found in Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze’s compelling 2001 essay “African Philosophy and the Analytic Tradition.” Therein, Eze provides the foundation for what Chimakonam aspires to. I do not imagine that Chimakonam will have any reason to disagree with the contents of Eze’s essay. Since he will not have reason to disagree with Eze, why does he not become a disciple of Eze and call his position “anti-import” or Eze’s preferred historicist position?

My thinking is that conversational philosophy is not that distinct from what I understand serious philosophers to seek to do. Philosophers everywhere are always in conversation one way or the other. They may be having bad conversations like universalists or they may be having seriously mistaken conversations like ethnophilosophers. What remains is that they are always in conversation. What makes Chimakonam’s conversation distinct is that he gives it some contextual value. However, as I have already indicated, that process is not new and it is a process that African philosophers have tried to advance in their different ways.

A key characteristic of philosophy, everywhere, is analysis. In addition, there is a demand for arguments (whether correct or wrong). Chimakonam is engaged in this core business of philosophy. He occasions agreement and disagreement, which again is a feature of philosophy. There are many styles of philosophy. My question is what does the addition of conversational philosophy really do? In terms of methodology, I do not think that conversational philosophy makes enough ground to break itself from what we know about philosophy in general, and African philosophy in particular. Just to make my

point, I wish to take the reader back to those days when there was a raging argument about the nature and possible existence of African philosophy. As different definitional propositions were forwarded and attacked and the attacks themselves were refuted, that was the best example of a tradition of conversationalism. It was a fine moment, methodologically, though a troubling moment about the real achievement of the conversation. Every moment there is a rebuttal of a philosophical proposition, conversation is taking place. In the areas of African philosophy I have worked in, there are always conversations going on. There is engagement between people and ideas in contexts they share, and ideas they recognize. There is some shared intellectual currency that does not bother itself with what analytical philosophers are up to.

If what I have described is acceptable to Chimakonam, it then becomes incumbent upon him to recognize that he is advocating a philosophical tradition that is already established, at least in two senses. His tradition was established by the great conversationalists who were the founders of modern African philosophy. The late 1970s running to the late 1980s was a great time for conversation in African philosophy. The second sense in which his tradition was established was through the works of all those thinkers who came before him with the insistence that reason is context-dependent. If Chimakonam believes this, then we can arrive at the conclusion that his claims have been covered extensively in other forums in different words. If that is the case, do we really need another name for what has been done for all these years? And what does this name signify? I suggest that we do not need another name and Chimakonam must just join orientations that already exist. A good start would be to reckon with Eze's descriptions of various positions in African philosophy. Chimakonam, as suggested, will fall under at least one of the positions suggested by Eze.

Relevant Literature

1. CHIMAKONAM, Jonathan O. "On the System of Conversational Thinking: An Overview," [Arumaruka: Journal of Conversational Thinking], pp1–46, 2021. Vol 1. No 1.
2. EZE, Emmanuel C. "African Philosophy and the Analytic Tradition," [Philosophical Papers], pp205-213, 2001. Vol 30. No 3.