

## CONVERSATIONS IN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

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Conversational philosophy is articulated by Jonathan O. Chimakonam as the new wave of philosophical practice both in “place” and in “space”. This journal adopts and promotes this approach to philosophizing for African philosophy. Readers are encouraged to submit their conversational piece (maximum of 2000 words) on any essay previously published in this journal or on any controversial topics, thoughts or authors for publication. It is recommended that conversations be on substantive issues in African philosophy rather than on metaphilosophical issues. The aim is to enhance the evolution of new epistemes in African philosophy. The subject column for the email submissions should read “Manuscript for Conversations”.

### **Conceptualization:**

To converse or hold a conversation literally means to have an informal exchange of ideas or information. Here, we employ the term in a slightly more technical sense. Philosophical conversation for us is not a mere informal exchange of ideas or a simple informal dialogue between two interlocutors; it is rather a strictly formal intellectual exercise propelled by philosophical reasoning in which critical and rigorous questioning creatively unveils new concepts from old ones. By conversational philosophy we mean that sort of philosophical engagement between individual thinkers with one another; on phenomenological issues of concern; or on one another’s thoughts where thoughts are unfolded from concepts, or from concept of concepts. By concept of concepts, I mean further interesting ideas or notions inspired by the discussion of particular concepts. Conversational philosophy thus is more than a dialogue; it is an encounter between proponents and opponents, or a proponent and an opponent engaged in contestations and protestations of thoughts in place and in space. A conversational school therefore would be any circle of like-minded philosophers who adopt this approach in their practice of philosophy. For me, this should now define not only the new era of African philosophy but the practice of philosophy generally in our age.

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## MENTAL SURGERY: ANOTHER LOOK AT THE IDENTITY PROBLEM: A CONVERSATION WITH JONATHAN CHIMAKONAM

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The question of what constitutes the personal identity of an individual has been pondered upon by many philosophers and Jonathan Chimakonam is one of such philosophers. His paper entitled “Mental Surgery: Another look at the Identity Problem” addresses this issue headlong and his conclusions are fascinating to say the least. Chimakonam in his essay adopts a *sociological* approach to the identity problem. For him, personal identity is basically a social property and a sociological concept (2011, 201). He also goes on to suggest that personal identity lies in the physical body and not in any metaphysical entity, soul or mind. Indeed, Chimakonam goes further to deny the existence of an independent spiritual mind or soul, which is the basis of the Cartesian mind-body dualism. What is implied here is that without the body, personal identity is inconceivable. It also implies that although personal identity is resident in the physical body of an individual, it must also be perceived and recognised by other individuals within the society such a body finds itself. To fortify this line of thought, Chimakonam articulates a thought experiment which describes a mental surgery in which the “minds” of two individuals (a dying Professor C. S. Momoh and Jonathan Chimakonam) are interchanged and with no short term memory, the mind of the professor, now inhabiting the body of Chimakonam, though bemused by the change in his bodily appearance, begins to gradually accept a new identity (that of Chimakonam) based on the insistence of those around him, which invariably alludes to the view that personal identity is determined by the opinions of others and thus, a sociological property (2011, 197-200). Peter Bisong, in a response to Chimakonam’s paper, argues that the spiritual soul/consciousness is the primary criterion of personal identity. He disputes Chimakonam’s sociological stance by making us aware of the fact that a change of society by a subject may present differing views on the personal identity of that subject and as such, the individual’s identity becomes contradictory (2014, 60-63).

Chimakonam’s view point may be agreeable to some but as I shall argue, it misses the mark on certain points. It fails to recognise that the sociological influence on the concept of personal identity is based both on a false premise and on an invalid argument, it fails to recognise the role of the “self” in the concept of personal identity and finally, it fails to recognise the fact that the concept of personal identity is nothing more than a necessary illusion.

The diachronic nature of the human body as well as the human psyche cannot be overlooked and from a strictly logical standpoint, the idea of “continuity” of the human body is doubtful. From the law of identity ( $A=A$ ), for a person (Mr. A) to be considered the same as the person that existed yesterday, he must possess the

same properties with the individual that lived a day before. This is however impossible because a single change in cell development, body mass, or even a change in thinking patterns suggest a change in property and a change in property implies a change in identity and as such to claim sameness or continuity is logically absurd.

Individual	= A
Individual with future changes	= ~ A
Concept of continuity:	A = ~A (Logical Absurdity)

Though this is true, the difficulty in keeping track of constant bodily changes and giving new identity as these changes occur is not lost on the brain. In order to bypass this near-impossible task, the brain assumes sameness of the body and based on this false but necessary premise attaches an “identity” to a human body. Thus the exclamatory phrase “I cannot believe this is you...!” is uttered when our brains encounter changes in an individual, which are too drastic to ignore because the brain assumes a false representation of sameness as reality.

A common (mis)conception Chimakonam also falls prey to is the view that the existence of a thing resides in the perception of that thing by others which was brought about by the Berkeley’s maxim “to be is to be perceived”. This view is at best sensational, with no logical connection behind it. To be is simply to exist and to exist does not depend on another being. If I exist as the only being in the world, I do not need another human being to perceive my body, because whether that individual perceives me or not, insofar as I exist, my body would exist regardless. If this is true, then it would be odd to suggest, as Chimakonam submits, that without the society, there is no person and that for the “self” to be meaningful, it must make sense to others (2011, 201). The awareness one has of his existence directly correlates with his feelings of identity i.e. his recognition of his “self” and such feelings are independent of societal influences as well as communal existence. If this is true, then the idea of personal identity as a social property would seem far-fetched.

To sum up this conversation, this paper argues that our idea of the “self” or personal identity, is nothing more than illusion which we cannot help but have. Like the mirage of water on the road which we cannot help but have because of the sun’s intensity, the illusion of personal identity is due to our brains interpretation of its ability to understand reality. In understanding consciousness (the foundation of our understanding of the self) we discover that consciousness is nothing more than the ability to perceive, understand and give meaning to that which is perceived as well as our emotional states, etc., (CHURCHLAND 2002, 133). In a bid to give meaning to this process of consciousness – a sort of meta-interpretation – the brain gives us the illusion of a self distinct from itself and it is to this illusory self that most individuals feel their personal identity resides.

### Relevant Literature

1. BISONG, Peter. “Jonathan O. Chimakonam’s Concept of Personal Identity: A Critical Reflection [Filosofia Theoretica], pp50-66, Vol 3., No 1., January-June. 2014. Paperback.
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3. OKEKE, Jonathan Chimakonam. “Mental Surgery: Another Look at the Identity Problem” [Filosofia Theoretica], pp195-208, Vol 1., No 1., Dec. 2011. Paperback.

**POSTMODERNISM AND THE OBJECTIVITY OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES: AN INTERROGATIVE CONVERSATION WITH AUGUSTINE ATABOR**

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This very short piece is a succinct interrogative conversation of a thesis canvassed by Augustine A. Atabor in his article, “The Question of Objectivity, its Implications for the Social Sciences in the Era of Postmodernism: Africa in Perspective”, published in the *Special Issue* of this journal on *Postmodernism and African Philosophy* (Volume 3, Number 2, July-December 2014, pp.50-61).

The article argues that postmodernism repudiates the objectivity of the social sciences or to use the author’s words: “The paper accentuates the difficulty with postmodernism which tries to deny the possibility of objective truth in the social sciences” (2014, 50). By objectivity or objective truth, the author refers to “the state or quality of being true even outside of a subject’s individual feelings, imaginations or interpretations... the ability to judge fairly without bias or external influence that occurs in a phenomenological way” (2014, 53). Necessarily, postmodernism has a lot to do with objectivity. As Atabor rightly underscores, postmodernism ultimately calls for “a philosophical and ontological intellectual practice that is non-dogmatic, tentative, and non-ideological” (2014, 54) and as such subjects all standpoints and conceptual schemes that claim to be the *sole universal standard, validator or possessor of objectivity/objective truth* to incessant questioning.

Given the fact that objectivity is very crucial to all forms of human inquiries and the attention postmodernism has attracted over the years, the article is no doubt an interesting and thought-provoking philosophical piece. The author was able to establish that there is a necessary link between postmodernism and the question of objectivity; and that postmodernism’s attack on objectivity has implications for the social sciences as well as Africa. However, the crucial question I have for the author is whether the rejection of the possibility of objective truth by postmodernism is an attack on the social sciences? Is postmodernism a vituperator or vindicator of the social sciences? Atabor’s position in his article is likely to mislead an uninformed reader to conclude that postmodernism is a vituperator of the social sciences but the converse is *more* correct. A good grasp of *when* the objectivity of the social sciences came under attack, *who* attacked it and *why* will make this point vivid.

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The question and quest for objective truth is perhaps as old as the human person. Probably, the quest arose as a result of apparent disagreements/conflicting opinions of people about the same phenomenon. Traditionally, different cultures and different areas of human endeavor do have a conventional method for discovering the truth about a given issue. No tradition, culture, or field of study proclaims its own conventional method as the *sole legitimate* method for the discovery of truth.

Everything was initially studied under the umbrella of philosophy. The humanities were held in high esteem. Then came the modern period and everything changed!

The trail blazing scientific discoveries and successes of Natural Philosophy (now Natural Sciences) during the renaissance-enlightenment-modern period led to the proclamation of the method of the natural sciences as the sole legitimate method for the discovery of objective truth anywhere and everywhere. In other words, whatever is objective must be scientific. And for anything to be scientific it must be positivistic; it must be a product of empirical observation, verification, experimentation, prediction and logico-mathematical explanation. Humbled by the achievements of the natural sciences, all disciplines surrendered their methods and bowed to the draconic rules of positivism. Hence, the emergence of the “logy” disciplines: Sociology, the scientific study of society; Anthropology, the scientific study of man; Psychology...! It was therefore in the *modern period* (the *when*) that the *scientific community* (the *who*) deny the possibility of the objectivity of the social sciences because they do not strictly employ the final arbiter of objectivity, the *scientific method* (the *how*) in their investigation of social phenomenon. Despite forcing the social sciences to *scientize*, the scientific community still insists that *objectivity* is outside the reach of the social sciences because it is by nature a value-laden discipline.

From a philosophical perspective, it is more accurate to describe postmodernism as “against modernism” and not “after modernism”. Historically, the period after the modern period of philosophy is treated as the contemporary period. Postmodernism is therefore not a historical period of philosophy but a philosophical mode of thinking that seeks to deconstruct the intolerant, imperialistic and arrogant god of the modern period, *The Scientific Method!* The ultimate aim of postmodernism is to liberate all disciplines and cultures from the strangulating hold and suffocating cage of Eurocentric conception of *Science/Reason*. Postmodernism denies the existence of an objective truth that is universal, cross-cultural and eternal. It argues that there is no objective truth that is insulated from internal influences, even in the natural sciences. And the philosophical apostles of postmodernism – Quine, Kuhn, Feyerabend, Rorty – have variously shown that every truth, including *scientific truth* is relative to a given social or intellectual community, at a given point in time. Thus the quest for objective truth that is insulated from all influences (cultural, social, ideological, psychological) is a scam. Everything is relative to a standpoint and objectivity is a product of “Solidarity” or “Consensus” reached by the leading authorities in a given intellectual or social community at a given point in time. These authorities are individuals whose idiosyncrasies inevitable have bearing on their thoughts.

Sequel to the foregoing, I posit that: first, postmodernism is the *vindicator* not the *vituperator* of the social sciences. Second, the claim of Atabor that “the attack of postmodernism on positivism is an attack aimed at the possible claims of the objectivity by the social sciences” (2014, 55) is inaccurate. Third, while “Modernism encourages the universalization of Western values” (2014, 58) postmodernism

encourages the relativization of all values, extols cross-cultural borrowing and challenges intellectuals in all cultures, including Africa, to seek and devise solutions to the diverse problems affecting human beings in the contemporary world using any fruitful method. Fourth, postmodernism sees objectivity in the social sciences and indeed in all the sciences as a matter of “compatibility” or “solidarity” with the “consensus” reached by the works of leading authorities in a given intellectual community at a given point in time. Last, globalization today is more or less the universalization of Western values because it is riding on the wheels of modernism, and an ideal global ideology will only be possible if it emerge as a product of consensus reached by the views of leading authorities in all regional intellectual and social communities that make up the globe.

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**FINDING A PLACE FOR INTERROGATORY THEORY: A CRITIQUE OF  
CHIMAKONAM'S PATTERNS OF SOCIAL DECONSTRUCTION,  
RECONSTRUCTION AND THE CONVERSATIONAL ORDER IN AFRICAN  
PHILOSOPHY**

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Chimakonam's brilliantly pieced article on Interrogatory Theory is his idea of a viable social philosophy for postcolonial Africa. The article is structured into two broad aspects namely: (i) Interrogatory Theory and (ii) Conversational order in African philosophy. Our attention in this critique will be on the first.

Interrogatory Theory (IT) is a social philosophy that seeks a revitalization of institutions in modern Africa. Its purpose is a "reflective assessment or interrogation of social structures (tradition and modernity) in order to deconstruct, construct/reconstruct or synthesize where necessary in pursuit of the future which contains the ideal" (CHIMAKONAM 2014, 2). In its introduction, Interrogatory theory makes what I think is a specious and audacious claim that "No society would ever develop if its inhabitants are free to live the way they please" (CHIMAKONAM 2014, 3). Ideas such as this are unmistakably dangerous for any society and a danger to civilization. Chimakonam believes that as a developing continent, Africa needs to hobble, the freedom of citizens to a certain extent, in what he calls "positive repression of treacherous human freedom in Africa" (3). It appears that he mistook the true philosophical import of what liberty or freedom entails, which is a knowledge that "where my freedom stops, another's begins". Furthermore, insisting that the purpose of the constitution is to dominate and repress human freedom is a limpid example of a misconstrued notion of the principles of "reward and sanctions". Laws are put in place to reward the diligent compliant and punish or sanction the rebellious. Thereupon, it is not done with the intention to shackle freedom but rather as an attempt to secure it.

Chimakonam applies the tool of interrogation on three (3) of Africa's postcolonial institutions viz; Education, Religion and Democracy. Education in postcolonial Africa is a system in retro-gradation. It is in this pathetic state that the meaning of education has been replaced with schooling where "curriculum lay emphasis on certification rather than learning" (CHIMAKONAM 2014, 7). The root cause of this predicament unlike Chimakonam's claim is not a faulty colonially influenced structure or a succession of bad postcolonial leadership; but the importation of a capitalist system. Capitalist system in more than one way seeks to commercialize everything possible and this has devalued the quality of Africa's educational institutions. Consequently, primary, secondary and tertiary schools are more profit oriented than value driven; which in turn has placed Africa in such morbid condition as we find ourselves. Again, because capitalism has gained

unbridled root in modern Africa, and the African's inability to see the big picture, make it compelling for him to trade a thing of substance such as knowledge for a piece of paper (certificate).

In deconstructing the institution of religion in Africa, Chimakonam appears to vent his personal dissatisfaction against Islam and Christianity. He insists that the "ultimate trouble with the postcolonial Africa is "religion". The colonial religions are the root of all the evil that plague Africa" (2014, 10). This claim is inaccurate and in no way can colonial religion wield that much influence. In modern Africa, it will be noticed that, adherents of both aforementioned religions spend just a little fraction of their time in religious activities which will at best be less than fifteen percent (15%). For those who go for prayers and religious engagements, they barely spend up to ten hours (10 hours) in a week doing religious activities. A great portion of time, in fact the other eighty five percent (80%) is spent in the pursuit of wealth and a better life. Howbeit, there are some abuse of religion in Africa which must be acknowledged such as a few cases of extortion by religious leaders and the extreme stands by some radical groups. But these abuses are not sufficient to be the causes of the catastrophe of postcolonial Africa. Rather, the African's inability to put the society first, the rise in humanistic doctrine, his natural selfish proclivity and a capitalist mind-set make him put his needs above all else. This selfish tendency and the enabling environment of capitalism have given little room for the adherent to seek morality, largely because the system does not favor the honest, the upright and the moral.

Lastly, Chimakonam's critiques the institution of democracy. Notwithstanding a few structural problems with democracy, it remains a plausible system of government for developing societies. Chimakonam points out that precolonial Africanized democracy was suitable for Africa since it operated a communitarian and consensus form of governance and decision making. Furthermore, he believes that colonially influenced democracy has come to replace this. Well, this paper disagrees considering the fact that apart from a change in nomenclature, the principles are very much the same in practice. In modern parlance, negotiation and dialogue are terms used in the place of communitarian and consensus.

Conclusively, we insist that all three institutions studied by interrogatory theory have a basal and common characteristic which has led to their defect in postcolonial Africa. This is the unbridled human selfishness that has been endorsed by the wave of capitalism; these have undoubtedly exploited all institutions in postcolonial Africa.

### **Relevant Literature**

1. CHIMAKONAM, Jonathan. “Interrogatory Theory: Patterns of Social Deconstruction, Reconstruction and the Conversational Order in African Philosophy” [Filosofia Theoretica], pp1-25, Vol 3. No 1., Jan-Jun, 2014. Paperback.