

Rethinking the Ideas of Individualism, Collective Responsibility and Unjust Indictment

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Abstract

This work is a critical examination of the ideas of individualism, collective responsibility and the issue of who takes the blame or responsibility for mistake or error committed within the society or within a particular group of people. The question and discourse of individualism and collective responsibility cuts across the areas of ethics, law, politics and the general philosophical discourses. This paper carefully crafted within the realm of ethics, raises critical questions whether a collective can be defined as a moral agent capable of taking blame when the situation calls for it or is it only the individual that can be termed a moral agent? To answer this question, two schools of thought have emerged, the one calling for the taking of a collective as a moral agent that is capable of moral evaluation and the one taking a collective as a non-moral agent incapable of moral evaluation, independently of the moral agents that are occupants of the collective. This debate will be critically looked into and thereafter reach a reasoned conclusion. The methodology adopted by this work is critical analysis, conceptual clarification, and reconstruction of relevant materials. The paper reiterated that there are consequences for every action whether caused by the individual person or by a group of individuals. Ultimately, the paper concludes that either the individual or collective action whether good or bad has its consequences on the society and diminishes the principle of common good. Thus, there is need to promote the principle of shared responsibility which will translate to the welfare and wellbeing of humanity.

Keywords: Common Good, Collective, Individualism, Responsibility, Unjust Indictment

1. Introduction

This work focuses on rethinking the ideas of individualism, collective responsibility and unjust indictment. It attempts to carefully analyze, expose and evaluate the interconnectedness of these three concepts especially from the ethical point of view. The discourse on who to blame for an act of omission or thereabout especially within the human society has a lot of debate among philosophers, lawyers, sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, political scientists at it were. The question whether a collective can be termed a moral agent or only the individual has generated a lot of argument in recent times. Questions such as: what is the role and responsibility of the individual to the collective and in the same vein, what is the role and responsibility of the collective to the individual? Who should be just to the other? Who is to be blamed when things go wrong whether in an organization, corporation, society, etc? Should the individual be punished for the crime a group has committed? Can a group be held accountable for the offence an individual or some individuals commit?

In responding to these, the work is divided into five parts: section one focuses on the introduction; section two conceptually analyses the ideas of individualism and the individual; section three examines the notions of responsibility and collective responsibility; section four attempts a synergy and the interconnectedness of the ideas of individualism, collective responsibility and unjust indictment and finally, the ends with a conclusion highlighting the submissions of the author.

2. The Idea of Individualism and the Individual

An adequate or comprehensive definition of individualism is difficult to come by. However, conceptually, individualism is a philosophical concept that emphasizes the fundamental claims in relation to the individual that the right of the individual should not be subsumed under group affiliation be it religious or ethnic. The Encarta dictionaries provide three entries: First, individualism is the pursuit of personal happiness and independence rather than collective goals or interests; secondly, it means a personal peculiarity or trait and thirdly, it is the belief that the society exists

for the benefit of the individual people, who must not be constrained by government interventions or made subordinate to collective interests. In all of these entries, the important issue emphasized is the worth and significance of the individual above other interests. Within the realm of political and economic philosophy, individualism as a doctrine was propounded by Thomas Hobbes and Adam Smith. It held society as an artificial device, existing only for the sake of its members as individuals and properly judged only according to them as individuals.¹

Motsamai Molefe asserts, “individualism refers to those moral theories that ultimately ground morality on some properties intrinsic to an individual like welfare, soul, rights.”² This definition, for Molefe, echoes moral theories like Utilitarianism and Kant’s deontology because of the individualist framework it adopted. For instance, citing Peter Singer, Molefe argues that Utilitarianism considers welfare construed as pleasure or informed preference on these intrinsic features of an individual. Secondly, that “Kant’s deontology explains rights or wrong actions in terms of whether they honor or undermine the individual’s autonomy, a feature that is internal to an individual.”³ Another perspective sees “individualism as a situation in which people are concerned with themselves and close family members.”⁴ They further provide the following as the character and nature of individualism:

Individualistic cultures emphasize promoting the individuals and his/her immediate family’s interest (underlining individual rights, not responsibilities), personal autonomy, privacy, self-realization, individual initiative, independence, individual decision making, an understanding of personal identity as the sum of

¹ “Individualism,” *Microsoft Encarta* (Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation, 2008).

² Motsamai Molefe, “Individualism in African Cultures,” *Cultura: International Journal of Philosophy of Culture and Axiology* (2017): 52, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/321723651>.

³ Molefe, “Individualism,” 52.

⁴ Abdel-Fattah Darwish and Gunter Huber, “Individualism vs. Collectivism in Different Cultures: A Cross-Cultural,” *Intercultural Education* (2003): 47, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/215889253>.2003.

attributes of the individual, and less concern about the needs and interests of others.⁵

In the thoughts of Conceição Soares, “individualism is that tendency to underline individual liberty, as against external authority and individual activity, as against associated activity.”⁶ Furthermore, Soares makes it clear that the concept individualism cannot be referred to as a principle, neither can it be called a theory. It can probably be best described as a tendency or an attitude. This tendency or attitude further discloses that the individual human being is a maker of the world he/she inhabits. This same tendency or attitude is said to be responsible in the formation of the post-Renaissance world.⁷ In essence, Soares reiterates, among other things, that individualism implies the position that the individual is the primary unit of reality and ultimate standard of value. It shows that the individual is the primary possessor of rights. In addition, it dissociates the “free” individual from the matrix of social relations and norms that in fact make agency, freedom, and even self-consciousness possible.⁸

Philosophically, in analyzing individualism, it is vital to begin by examining the notion of the ‘individual’. A human being is an individual person. Individual generally implies a part of a whole. L.M. Corvez avers that strictly speaking, an individual is a being distinct from every other being, undivided and non-identical with anything else. The individual is a concrete and substantial being; such that one cannot speak of an accident; like color or a sound as an individual.⁹ Corvez highlights further that man is a living being, individual who persists in existence by himself.¹⁰ Thus, an individual is also a singular being, one among many, a being in a multitude. Varghese Kleetus on his part explains that in each man exists humanity because it is a concept, which only finds its place

⁵ Darwish and Huber, “Individualism vs. Collectivism,” 48.

⁶ Conceição Soares, “The Philosophy of Individualism: A Critical Perspective,” *International Journal of Philosophy and Social Values* 1, no. 1 (2018): 16.

⁷ Soares, “The Philosophy of Individualism,” 16.

⁸ Soares, “The Philosophy of Individualism,” 16.

⁹ L. M. Corvez, “Individualism” in *The New Encyclopedia* VII, ed. Thomas Gale (Farmington, 2003), 422.

¹⁰ Corvez, “Individualism,” 422.

in the individual human being.¹¹ Man is distinct from every other man and it is impossible to divide him into several men without destroying him. A medieval Church Father, Don Scotus holds that the soul is an individual as against matter and that the soul is the cause and principle of individuation (individuation is the process through which a person achieves a sense of individuality separate from the identities of others) in man.¹² Scotus refused to see individuation through the spectacles of Aristotle. The argument was that, matter for him can be individual and the cause of individuation. Thus, if the matter possesses more of the character of individuality, it is as a result of the soul, even if in principle.¹³ For St Thomas Aquinas, the individual is a substance which subsists in its own right and separately from others. Each human being exists in humanity.¹⁴

It is worthy of mention that a good number of philosophers are of the view that the individual emerges from the society. A few others hold that the individual is a product of the society which is the driving force behind him and to which he is subject to. By implication, despite being a part of a whole, the individual is shaped and formed by his society. As such, one is not an individual if he is not part of a whole.¹⁵ Albert W. Musschenga argued that the idea of the individual that led to individualism has generated lots of problem in the Western world.¹⁶ For instance, a lot of crimes, criminality, political upheaval, social and economic lapses have been traced to the doctrine of individualism and by extension to the individual human person. Furthermore, van Der Loo and van Reyden as cited by Musschenga, uphold the values of the individual through individuation. Individuation is perceived as part of the

¹¹ Kleetus Varghese, *Personalism in John Paul II: An Anthropological Study of His Social Doctrines* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation Publication, 2005), 43.

¹² See Varghese, *Personalism*, 43.

¹³ See Varghese, *Personalism*, 43.

¹⁴ See Varghese, *Personalism*, 43.

¹⁵ Varghese, *Personalism*, 41-43.

¹⁶ Albert Musschenga, "The Many Faces of Individualism," in *The Many Faces of Individualism, Morality and the Meaning of Life*, ed. Anton Van Harskamp and Albert Musschenga (Belgium: Peeters, 2001), 3.

four elements to the process of modernization; the remaining three include differentiation, rationalization and domestication. This is an objective process of social change and in such process, the individual breaks away from the bonds of close and proximate group and becomes dependent on more distant and anonymous social forces. Ultimately, these have led to new form of dependence and liberation of the individual respectively.¹⁷ Individuation enables the individual to shape his own life and become what he desires. Rationality plays a fundamental role in seeing the individual becoming conscious of themselves as a person and as an individual. Thus, he remains a member of the community with a subjective view of his roles based on his personal experiences. He sees himself as a unique and incomparable being with a different view and character from the rest of the society.¹⁸

John Mbiti's popular dictum, "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am" captures the position of some African philosophers on the importance and role of the individual in the society. Mbiti postulated that the individual alone cannot be discussed as an entity since his existence is of necessity knitting to the others.¹⁹ He added that in African societies, "the respect and social standing of an individual, the influences which the individual possess together with the individual's personal sense of responsibility is measured in terms of how much sensitivity the individual demonstrates to the need, and the welfare of the group."²⁰ Hence, the individual is an integral part of the community. Pantaleon Iroegbu remarked that the individual is in the community and the community is in the individual and this he termed communal dialectics.²¹ Thus, both are inextricably involved in each other. For Instance, Iroegbu narrated that an Igbo child in Nigeria sees himself/herself as an individual with freedom and

¹⁷ See Musschenga, "The Many Faces of Individualism."

¹⁸ See Musschenga, "The Many Faces of Individualism."

¹⁹ John Mbiti, *The African Religion and Philosophy*, (New York: Double Day, 1970), 141.

²⁰ Mbiti, *The African Religion and Philosophy*, 141.

²¹ Pantaleon Iroegbu, *Kpim of Personality: Treatise on the Human Person* (Owerri: Eustel Publications, 2000), 106.

separateness, yet deeply committed to his/her *umunna* community (*umunna* in Igbo means kinsmen) when there is a pressing issue to be tackled. The drum sounds early in the morning for the gathering of the village community and each person responds from his place as an individual.²² The Yoruba ontology reveals that the primary role of an individual includes promoting harmony in the society as in the cosmos. The belief is that for an individual to survive and cope with the demands of daily existence, he/she needs the help of the supernatural being. Olusegun Oladipo added:

In this world, neither knowledge, nor wisdom, nor power or wealth is sufficient for the individual to cope with the demands of daily existence, even though each of them, in varying degrees, is a basic requirement of human survival. This is why in spite of individual's effort to seek fulfillment, attempts are still made to achieve this goal through prayer to *Olodumare*, sacrifices to the divinities – who in a fundamental sense represent the human quest for understanding (*imo*), wisdom (*ogbon*), protection (*abo*), power (*agbara*) and assistance (*iranlowo*), and glorification to the evil forces called warriors (*ajagun*).²³

The implication is that beyond the community supporting the individual in the society; such an individual also needs the support and the assistance of supernatural force. Thus, the individual is not alone in his/her sojourns in the world. In essence, individualism or the individual, places importance on the self, on the notion of self-development.

3. The Idea of Responsibility and the Notion Collective Responsibility

The concept of responsibility is a universal one. Its meaning could be gleaned from every particular and general fields of knowledge. Its usage among narratives is popular, positive and significant. The notion of responsibility connotes the capacity to make crucial decisions at every given time without compulsion or under some

²² Iroegbu, *Kpim of Personality*, 111.

²³ Olusegun Oladipo, "Rethinking Yoruba World-View and Ideals of Life," in *The Third Way in African Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Kwasi Wiredu*, ed. Olusegun Oladipo, (Ibadan: Hope Publications, 2002), 115.

kind of restraints. Peter Singer's assertion on this is apt when he said, "You cannot evade responsibility by imitating beings who are incapable of making ... choice."²⁴ The implications of this statement can be examined from two angles or more. For instance, nonhuman animals lack the capacity for free moral judgment; that according to Singer, they lack the capacity of considering the alternatives open to them or reflecting on the ethics of their own diet. Consequently, it is impossible to hold animals responsible for what they do or to judge.²⁵ Secondly, it would be absolutely immoral to allow higher animals, that is, rational persons evade punishment as a result of their wrong actions. The simple reason is that, every rational person ought to know that there is a consequence for every action and that is what being responsible connotes.

David Miller asserted that responsibility is a concept that is difficult, slippery and confusing to define especially in the lexicon of moral and political philosophy.²⁶ He illustrated this by citing the work of H.L.A Hart in the passage below:

As captain of the ship, X was responsible for the safety of his passengers and crew. But on his last voyage he got drunk every night and was responsible for the loss of the ship with all aboard. It was rumoured that he was insane, but the doctors considered that he was responsible for his actions. Throughout the voyage he behaved quite irresponsibly, and various incidents in his career showed that he was not a responsible person. He always maintained that the exceptional winter storms were responsible for the loss of the ship, but in the legal proceedings brought against him he was found criminally responsible for his negligent conduct, and in separate civil proceedings he was held legally responsible for the loss of life and property. He is still alive and he is morally responsible for the deaths of many women and children.²⁷

²⁴ Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 71.

²⁵ Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 71.

²⁶ David Miller, *National Responsibility and Global Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 82.

²⁷ See H.L.A. Hart, *Punishment and Responsibility*, cited in Miller, *National Responsibility*, 82.

Miller recognizes that responsibility could be discussed from two senses, namely, 'outcome responsibility' that is, responsibility we bear for our own actions and decisions.²⁸ For instance, when an agent is found to have messed up a class room by making it dirty and filled with refuse such that the class room is uninhabitable; the responsibility of making the class room sweeping and clearing the class of filths falls on the agent who was responsible for making it dirty initially. In other words, the agent should be responsible for clearing up the room be he/she is the one who messed up the room. This is what Miller refers to as outcome responsibility.²⁹ Simply put, it means been responsible for one's own actions. The second sense of responsibility according to David Miller is 'remedial responsibility', that is, the responsibility we may have to come to aid of those who need help.³⁰ In other words, an agent having a duty or obligation to put bad situation right. For instance, when an agent B is selected to clean up the class room another agent A messed up. In this case, agent B is merely acting out of duty because he/she was not responsible for making the room dirty. This kind of responsibility is called remedial responsibility.³¹ In other words, ensuring that a bad situation is remedied.

Following the above, Miller showed that the above notions of responsibility can be distinguished between identifying responsibility and assigning it. Identifying responsibility means that certain conditions must be considered to ascertain if truly agent A was responsible for the room that was messed up. For instance, it would be important to establish certain matters of fact, such as whether agent A had been in the classroom earlier. The reason why the fact finding is important is to avoid a situation whereby agent A was not actually responsible for the messy classroom when in fact it was agent B who was responsible.³² Conversely, assigning responsibility "involves a decision to attach certain costs or benefits

²⁸ Miller, *National Responsibility*, 81.

²⁹ Miller, *National Responsibility*, 83-84.

³⁰ Miller, *National Responsibility*, 81.

³¹ Miller, *National Responsibility*, 84.

³² Miller, *National Responsibility*, 84.

to an agent, whether or not the relevant conditions are fulfilled.³³ Simply, an agent does have to be responsible for the messy room before he/she is asked to clean it up. Above all, Miller argued that “unlike identifications, assignments of responsibility can be justified or unjustified, but they cannot be correct or incorrect.”³⁴

Peter Singer made a similar argument which is related to ‘outcome responsibility’ above that the notion of responsibility entails been responsible for our actions rather than our omissions.³⁵ He argued further that we are under greater obligation to help those whose misfortunes we caused. For instance, Singer stated that this is part of the reason advocates of overseas aid would always argue that the Western world is responsible for poverty of the third world nations through forms of economic exploitation beginning with colonialism.³⁶ It is on this basis that the consequentialists submitted thus, “we are responsible for all the consequences of our actions, and if a consequence of my spending money on luxury item is that someone dies, I am responsible for that death.”³⁷ The implication is that the notion of responsibility connotes a personal principle, a choice one makes to guide one’s life, values, purposes, goals, and belief systems.

J.M. Elegido’s discourse on the idea or notion of responsibility and collective responsibility, was inspired by his criticism of the ethical principle of the utilitarian theory that emphasized that “what matters is the quantity of good we do, not who is the recipient of it, for after all the good of any human being is as good as that of another.”³⁸ This kind of principle will not allow efficiency given the fact that the psychological make-up of human beings as they are actually are, what is everybody’s responsibility easily escapes everybody’s attention. For instance, if everybody had the same responsibility to help a child with his homework it is quite

³³ Miller, *National Responsibility*, 84.

³⁴ Miller, *National Responsibility*, 84.

³⁵ Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 226.

³⁶ Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 226.

³⁷ Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 226.

³⁸ Juan Manuel Elegido *Fundamentals of Business Ethics* (Lagos: Criterion Publishers, 2009), 78.

likely that he would end up having to do without any help. Thus, for Elegido, kind of unwarranted utilitarian position prompted human beings through ages to divide responsibilities.³⁹ In essence, efficiency is better served when each and every one is given his/her own responsibilities given the fact that we are called to perform different roles in the society. All cannot be bankers, medical doctors, president, governors, engineers or technicians. We are called to function differently and carry out our responsibilities based on our callings and talents. Thus, for Elegido, with each assigned responsibilities, things work much better than if everybody were in charge of everything and equally responsible to provide for the welfare of everybody.⁴⁰

Richard E. Ashcroft's analysis of the notion of collective was premised on the dictum "Why should I be moral."⁴¹ He added, "Why should I act in a way which is, or seems to me to be contrary to my own personal interests, even where this may produce benefits, or avoid harm, to another person or group."⁴² For Ashcroft, self-interested behaviour is a short-term act, however, in the long term each individual benefits by cooperating: this includes occasional sacrifices of one's own interests for the benefit of others.⁴³ This nature of collective responsibility benefits all, not just the individual. This is further exemplified when parents get their children vaccinated against communicable diseases or adults get the COVID 19 vaccines. It is a matter of collective responsibility when people tell their partners when they have contracted sexually transmitted disease. The benefits derived from telling your partner about the sexually transmitted disease or taking the COVID-19 vaccine is collective and long termed. Above all, Ashcroft stated the obvious that:

³⁹ Elegido, *Fundamentals of Business Ethics*, 78.

⁴⁰ Elegido, *Fundamentals of Business Ethics*, 79.

⁴¹ Richard E. Ashcroft, "Individual Freedom versus Collective Responsibility: An Ethicist's Perspective," *Emerging Themes in Epidemiology* 3, no. 11 (2006): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1186/1742-7622-3-11>

⁴² Ashcroft, "Individual Freedom," 1.

⁴³ Ashcroft "Individual Freedom," 1.

... if morality rests on an extended theory of self-interest alone, then any specific proposal about collective action can founder on the three problems I have discussed here. If we want people to act morally, it is not because so acting is in enlightened self-interest alone, but because sometimes we need people to make genuine sacrifices of their interests to the benefit of others: to act against their interests, in the certainty or high probability of personal loss.⁴⁴

On the notion of collective responsibility, Alberto Giubilini and Neil Levy raised the following critical questions: Is there anything like collective responsibility? Can a corporation, a state, a mob, a social movement, a random collection of individuals be collectively morally responsible for things like an environmental disaster, an act of violence, or a bad policy or a form of discrimination? Put differently, is it only individual members of those collectives who are morally responsible for such state of affairs?⁴⁵ In responding to these questions, Giubilini and Levy stated that it is important to differentiate between causal responsibility and moral responsibility.⁴⁶ Furthermore, they agreed to the fact that collectives can be morally responsible and that in fact, the kind of responsibility attributed to collectives is intrinsic. Thus, "When we say that some groups can be morally responsible in an intrinsically collective way, we mean that they can be deserving of blame, praise or sanction, entirely in virtue of past actions or omissions, in a way that is intrinsically collective. Intrinsically collective moral responsibility, so conceived, is a subset of the moral responsibility appropriately attributed to groups."⁴⁷ Following this, Giubilini and Levy submitted that responsibility is collective if two conditions are satisfied:

First, it must be the case that attributions of collective responsibility (e.g. "Germany was collectively responsible for

⁴⁴ Ashcroft, "Individual Freedom," 2.

⁴⁵ Alberto Giubilini and Neil Levy, "What in the World Is Collective Responsibility" *Dialectica* 72, no. 2 (2018): 1, <https://www.researchgate.net/publications/327205156>.

⁴⁶ Giubilini and Levy, "Collective Responsibility," 2.

⁴⁷ Giubilini and Levy, "Collective Responsibility," 2-3.

the Holocaust”; “naturopaths are collectively responsible for the loss of herd immunity”; “Exxon is collectively responsible for climate change”) are not metaphorical, or best explained as shorthand for a more complex claim about attributions of an individual form of responsibility (like “a large number of ordinary Germans are individually responsible for the Holocaust” or “senior executives at Exxon are responsible for climate change”). Second, the kind of collective responsibility attributed to the group must not be individual responsibility scaled up, applying to a collective because it satisfies one or more of the metaphysical conditions required for moral responsibility.⁴⁸

Following from the above, it’s clear the elements, character and principle of collective responsibility rest on everybody. It derives its strength from collaboration and common good.

4. Individualism, Collective Responsibility and Unjust Indictment: A Synergy

At this juncture, it is imperative to examine the synergy that exists between individualism, collective responsibility and unjust indictment. The word unjust indictment can be rendered and examined in so many ways; namely from the legal, political, social or ethical perspectives. However, a simple definition of indictment means a statement or indication that something is wrong or somebody is to blame (Encarta Dictionaries). On the other hand, unjust indictment means, “grossly unfair outcome results from a civil or a criminal judicial”. For example, when a person is convicted and punished for a crime that he or she did not actually commit. The key terms in the above definitions revolves, wrong doing, blame, punishment, crime, conviction, etc. The word unjust here connotes the state of being unfair, just, lacking in justice or giving the other his/her due rights.

Having attempted to define unjust indictment, the question that should follow is what is the relationship between the individual, collective responsibility and unjust indictment? In other words, what is the role and responsibility of the individual to the

⁴⁸ Giubilini and Levy, “Collective Responsibility,” 3.

collective and in the same vein, what is the role and responsibility of the collective to the individual? Who should be just to the other? Who is to be blame when things go wrong whether in an organization, corporation, society, etc? Should the individual be punished for the crime a group has committed? Can a group be held accountable for the offence an individual or some individuals commit? Who should be morally responsible to whom? Should responsibility be an individual venture or collective venture? These ethical questions are fundamental in carefully examining the relationship between the individual, collective responsibility and unjust indictment.

At the foundation of this discourse, it is necessary to assert that the notion of moral responsibility is the same in both individual and collective contexts. For instance, one can argue that an agent is morally responsible for some state of affairs (that is, an action, omission, or consequences of action or omission) if the agent is deserving of praise or blame.⁴⁹ For some scholars, the argument on who is to be blame or praise for a good or bad; whether it is the individual or the group (collective) has always generated debate as it were. R. J. Wallace in his work published in 1994, titled: *Responsibility and Moral Sentiments* submitted that “An agent is morally responsible insofar as it is fair to hold him morally responsible.”⁵⁰ The implication is that if there is a sufficient condition that the individual is culpable for an omission, then such a person should be blame. Pekka Makela on his part maintains that “only human agents qualify as moral agents, and thus moral responsibility, either individual or collective, is to be ascribed to individual agents either individually or collectively.”⁵¹ He added that collectives in their own right are not capable of bearing moral responsibility for the simple reason that even if collectives are accepted as agents, they cannot satisfy conditions of moral responsibility in the way and manner that would make it fair to

⁴⁹ See Pekka Makela, *Collective Responsibility: Against Collectivism* (Finland: University of Helsinki, 2013).

⁵⁰ Makela, *Collective Responsibility*, 5.

⁵¹ Makela, *Collective Responsibility*, 1.

hold collective agents morally responsible in their own right.⁵² He premised his rejection on that fact that, collectivists based their argument of 'plural subject account' which does not fit into the prevailing philosophical literature on moral responsibility. He added:

The line of reasoning in this work, roughly, is that there is (and can be) no viable (collectivist) account of collective moral agency and since the notion of moral responsibility both in collective and individual cases presupposes agency, the viable notion of collective moral responsibility is to be explicated along the lines of (irreducible) joint moral responsibility of individual agents.⁵³

Philip Pettit disagrees with the individualists who claimed that collective responsibility is not feasible. Pettit reasons that it is conceptually possible and sometimes desirable to hold collective agents responsible in a non-metaphorical sense for causing some outcomes, even in cases in which no individual agent can be held fully responsible. He added further that collective agents may satisfy all the conditions for being held responsible; as long as they can be autonomous agents, making and executing decisions on the basis of beliefs and desires which can be properly ascribed to them. Govert den Hartogh disagrees with Philip Pettit on the basis that holding collective agents responsible is a practice and the actual forms that practice takes have to be judged in practical and moral terms, that, terms of effectiveness and practice. In this regard Govert states that Pettit notion of collective responsibility falls short of moral responsibility. Giubilini and Levy somewhat remarked that collective moral responsibility can only take place where there are intentions, actions and identities of individuals. Simply, a mere aggregation of individual responsibilities is not enough to conclude that such an act can count for collective responsibility. In other words, "the intentions, actions and identities of the collective are not reducible to an aggregation of individual intentions, actions and identities."⁵⁴ In essence, for one to adjudge an action as a collective, such must fulfill these two

⁵² Makela, *Collective Responsibility*, 1.

⁵³ Makela, *Collective Responsibility*, 10.

⁵⁴ Giubilini and Levy, "Collective Responsibility," 201.

conditions: (a) the responsibility in question must not be reducible to a mere aggregation of individual responsibilities. (b) a collective that has its own identity, its own intentions and performs its own action is appropriately held responsible in a way that accounts for its collective character.⁵⁵ Above all, Giubilini and Levy argued in conclusion that, what some scholars had defined as collective responsibility, are not genuine collective responsibility, but individual responsibility.

Still in support of individual responsibility, Jan Narveson argues that the question for morals is always and fundamentally cast in individual terms: for instance, when we say, what is this, that, or the other person to do? If such questions are posed for a group, it would say nothing to anyone unless there is some way of understanding that individuals, such as members of that group or persons affected by its behaviour, have duties or rights or some other moral status in relation to it.⁵⁶ Narveson strengthened his argument thus:

When group rights are affirmed or denied, then, the issue is this: Does someone, by virtue of belonging to that group, have a certain right, or a right-related duty, which he would not otherwise have had? If it is claimed that he does, then why? What is it about this group that has that normative implication? The fact that the fundamental subjects of moral directives are individuals does not in the least preclude the relevance of group membership. After all, to be subject to any sort of moral requirement is to fall within the scope of some level of generalization, and any generalization determines a group, namely those possessing the properties by virtue of which that generalization addresses them. If all *G*s are to do *x*, then my being a *G* is what makes that rule applicable to me; and to be a *G* is to be a member of the group or class of *G*s.⁵⁷

This simply speaks to the fact that; the individual's role and functions are important if when they belong to a group. That individuals act by the virtue of membership of a group, does not in

⁵⁵ Giubilini and Levy, "Collective Responsibility," 195.

⁵⁶ Jan Narveson, "Collective Responsibility," *Journal of Ethics* (2002): 180, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/226371350>.

⁵⁷ Narveson, "Collective Responsibility," 180.

any way diminish their status as a moral agent responsible for his actions.

The Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct of World Health Organization (WHO) made allusions to individual responsibilities especially as it concerns its staff members. The Code itself is not a subject of debate as it made it clear that all individual members of staff must exhibit behaviour that is ethically inclined to the rules and norms of the organization as it were. In essence, the Code states, “Responsibility for ethical behaviour and professional conduct lies with all staff members at all levels, and must be taken seriously, as it forms the basis of WHO’s reputation...”⁵⁸ Specifically, the Code refers to individual persons thus; “All WHO staff must inform themselves of the provisions of this Code. In particular, staff are reminded that their actions may have consequences that they are ultimately accountable for. It is their responsibility to seek advice before taking action and to ensure that they comply with the principles outlined in this document.”⁵⁹ The deduction one can make from the WHO Code of Ethics is the emphasis on individual moral responsibility especially to duty, rules, regulations, standards and norms of the organization. It is true that the document did not emphasize collective responsibility, yet one could observe the document somewhat collectively encourage all members staff to be individually responsibility and make right decisions that is ethically inclined to the standard of the organization.

It is imperative to note that one cannot speak of justice, fairness, injustice or unjust indictment in isolation. The individual makes up the collective. So, there is no way a society will be just if certain individuals are treated unjustly. For there to be justice, society must be fair to all. Hence, Joseph Omoregbe reminds us that the foundation of justice is the fundamental equality of all men which demands equal treatment, equal distribution of goods,

⁵⁸ World Health Organization (WHO), *The Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct of World Health Organisations*, (2017): 9, <https://www.who.int>About> (Accessed May 5, 2022).

⁵⁹ WHO, *The Code of Ethics*, 12.

rewards, punishment. In the discharge of justice,⁶⁰ Omoregbe reminded us that it is appropriate to talk of equitable distribution of benefits and burden that equal distribution. For instance, there could be justifiable reasons why one section or some sections of a country or group should have greater share of the goods of the country than other sections. This is equitable distribution. Equal distribution among some group or a country is a recipe for injustice. Thus, while collective responsibility should be encouraged in the sense that it promotes common good, we should not gloss over the fact that collective responsibility boils down to individual agency in the final analysis. In other words, what is called collective responsibility is a collection or a combination of human agency. Hence, human agency should be given a proper attention because it is the ultimate determinant of collective responsibility.

The individual is encouraged to behave morally because the collection of all individual actions eventuates in what is called collective responsibility. This explicates one of the reasons why Kant prescribes autonomy, rationality and the categorical imperative as an important criterion for individual morality. In the Kantian universalizability principle of an action states that: “act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it becomes a universal law.”⁶¹ Simply, in order to know whether a particular action I intend to perform is morally right or wrong, I should according to Kant test it by means of universalization; that is whether it is desirable by all men.⁶² In essence, if everyone cultivates the attitude of good moral behaviour, that is when we can have collective responsibility that will promote common good.

On the other hand, the interaction between individualism and collective responsibility in society makes progress achievable. Collective responsibility makes the society progress but not

⁶⁰ Joseph Omoregbe, *Ethics: A Systematic & Historical Study* (Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publications Limited, 1993), 113.

⁶¹ Cited in T. M. Greene, *Kant Selections* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957).

⁶² Omoregbe, *Ethics*.

individualism. Thus we should not unjustly indict some specific people as responsible for our social dysfunctionality. For instance, our leaders are normally blamed for all the ills in the society, however, this is a wrong approach to solving a problem given the fact that every problem has a group root; therefore, in order to holistically solve a problem, everybody must work together for a common purpose of ridding the society of problems. Anselm Jimoh argues in favour of the collectives (i.e. communalism) as against individualism. He said:

I made a case elsewhere for African communitarianism against the individualism and selfishness that I considered to be tearing Nigeria apart in recent times. I argued that individualism is antithetical to African communalism; therefore, we require “commitment to common good and interest, understanding of our individual place in the chain or reality, in which we mutually complement each other and define our being”. This will contribute to tackling the injustice occasioned by Othering.⁶³

By this, Jimoh is making a case a more united and purposeful African society where we all have concern for the ‘Other’. In such society justice will prevail and African values of the community as against the individuality will prevail. He also argues against the idea of globalization occasioned by individualism which for him has negatively separated Africans from their Africanness. Jimoh concludes: “The lessons from African communalism in relation to the issues of justice and the Othered minority are that we return, through cultural revival, to our Africanness. Such cultural revivals should cognize and acknowledge the developments of civilization, especially globalization.”⁶⁴ Put differently, the idea of community and individual which Gykeye, Menkiti, Wiredu, Oladipo, Oyeshile and some notable African philosophers ruminated on is perceived today as one fundamental doctrine or principle useful for promoting the true justice, fairness and equity.

⁶³ Anselm Jimoh, “Justice and the Othered Minority: Lessons from African Communalism,” in *Handbook of African Philosophy of Difference*, ed. Elvis Imafidon, (Switzerland: Springer, 2020), 269.

⁶⁴ Jimoh, “Justice and the Othered Minority,” 269.

5. Conclusion

This work has attempted an expository, analysis and a rethinking of the idea of individualism, collective responsibility and unjust indictment. These are universal and general concepts which philosophers, lawyers, sociologists, anthropologists and scholars of economics and politics have grappled with for some time now. The paper examined these concepts or ideas by dividing the work into five sections. The first section focuses on the introduction where the idea of the entire essay was exposed; the second part of this work exposes the notions of individualism and the individual as both a philosophical doctrine and social term. The work shows that individualism emphasizes liberty, freedom, rights and equality of the individual person and that the individual ought not to be subsumed under any group such that his/her rights are infringed upon.

The third section examined the notions of responsibility and collective responsibility. Here, I attempted to show that though the concepts are sometimes difficult to define, yet I concluded that responsibility means a call to duty and obligation, while collective responsibility means the obligation a group of people are expected to carry out. Mostly, the work justifies the point that responsibility has a deep moral and ethical connotations as it involves the issues of freedom, rationality, autonomy, etc. The fourth section attempts a rethinking of the relationship that exists between the individual and collective responsibility. The analysis bifurcates between those who place value on the individual such that he/she is not unjustly blamed, praise or punished for the sins or the actions of the group. On the other, some are of the view that there is indeed a collective responsibility. And that there are certain conditions that must be fulfilled before responsibilities are said to be collective or individualistic. This section raises some questions on who should be responsible within a given society or an organization.

Essentially, in examining the various submissions, it is clear that the work was an attempt to re-examine the old question on who is more important in the society when discourse of moral responsibility is put before us. Let us not forget that, there are consequences for every action whether the one carried out by the

individual or by a group of individuals. When a group fails to act, or when an individual also fails to act, the consequences and the effect becomes a collective failure. As such, whether we like it or not, there is need to propagate the idea of shared responsibility which will ultimately culminate in common good. Just as the individual is encouraged to behave morally, the same should be extended to the group and at the end of it all, the collection of all individual actions eventuates in what is called collective responsibility and by extension, the idea of justice, fairness, and equity naturally shadows unjust indictment.