Stellenbosch Theological Journal 2021, Vol 7, No 1, 1–18
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17570/stj.2021.v7n1.t10
Online ISSN 2226-2385 | Print ISSN 0028-2006
2021 © Pieter de Waal Neethling Trust

# Contextualising Etienne de Villiers' Ethics of Responsibility in the African context: Some recommendations

**Kefas Kure Umaru**
Stellenbosch University
Stellenbosch, South Africa
umkefas32@gmail.com

**Abstract**

Being a South African systematic theologian, Etienne de Villiers has been involved in discourses regarding public morality with specific interest in the ethics of responsibility. In pursuing this task, his recent scholarship has resulted in proposing a contemporary Christian ethic of responsibility that addresses public moral issues. While this proposal has significant promise for engaging with issues distorting the moral fabric of most African societies, it is considered as lacking some resources for speaking to the African person critically and clearly because of its Western character. Hence, there appears to be an incompatibility with aspects of African moral and social identities in his proposal that require critical consideration of concepts more appealing to the African context. Hence, this article proposes an African (primarily Nigerian) theological engagement with de Villiers' views. The intention is to make de Villiers' work more accessible and, contextual, to the broader African ethical worldview.

**Keywords**

*ethics of responsibility; public theology; Nigeria; Africa; morality*

## Introduction

This article centres on contextualising the works of an erudite theologian, Etienne de Villiers, in the African landscape. Such contextualising efforts carry elements of decolonisation of ideas and minds of the African people, and how those ideas could usefully impact the way theology is done and applied. Stated clearly by Oelofsen (2015:131), "the development of concepts with their roots in Africa has the prospect of working towards

the decolonisation of the African mind and intellectual landscape." The above assertion carries some important promises for interrogating ideas and concepts with the aim of making them more accessible, convincing, and appealing to the quest of an African mind. Considering the diversity within the African context, special attention must be given to the choice of issues and how applicable they could be in addressing values and ethical living, the concerns which de Villiers imagines the ethic of responsibility to address. However, one way to do this effectively is to work closely with what other African scholars are saying in the ethic of responsibility discourses.

While ethics of responsibility has played a significant role in parts of Europe (Germany) and the American contexts, little has been done about this area of study in the African context, despite its rich theological components. However, championing this area of study in the African context is the Emeritus Professor Etienne de Villiers, who has written substantially so that we have some resources to engage in this field of ethics. De Villiers has helped to bring the discourse down to the African context through his critical engagements with both the German and the American counterparts. This way, an ethics of responsibility is becoming an important theological field of study attracting the attention of scholarship in the African context. Thus, this article has two primary objectives, namely, to applaud the significance of Etienne de Villiers' construction of a contemporary Christian ethic of responsibility and, secondly, to contextualise his thoughts to an African audience. This is because of the Eurocentric tone in de Villiers' thoughts that this essay intends to contextualise and perhaps make them more assessable to an African context. In doing this, I will firstly and briefly outline what Etienne de Villiers' proposal of such an ethic entails, while pinpointing the implication of those views to the African context. In the second major section, however, I shall make a few recommendations to make his proposal more accessible, appealing, and with practical implications in the African context.

## 1. De Villiers and the contemporary Christian ethics of responsibility

Following the progression of ethic of responsibility from other contexts, de Villiers specifically categorises his view as the contemporary Christian ethic of responsibility to differentiate it from others. One reason for this

categorization is partly because of the context in which he writes from and the peculiarity of the issues he seeks to address, namely ethical living, and ethical decision-making. However, to situate de Villiers' thoughts properly, it is wise to consider them within the context in which he writes.

Beginning with the analysis of the foremost pioneer of ethics of responsibility, Max Weber, de Villiers made a case for some dissociation from Weber (de Villiers 2018). In his assessment, Weber's view on the negative effects of modernisation on traditional Western ethics has not been as devastated as Weber puts it. As such, de Villiers uncovers the need to take such conversations further by proposing why a critical assessment of such a view on the ethic of responsibility from a contemporary perspective could be undertaken (de Villiers 2018:186). This ethic, for de Villiers, does carry promise because of the ongoing unethical living in contemporary society. More specifically, a contemporary Christian ethic of responsibility is necessary because it arises to "salvage and promote ethical living in contemporary societies" (de Villiers 2018:207).

Clearly, contemporary society, particularly African, is confronted with challenges threatening the promotion of ethical living. One of such challenges is the widespread corruption that continues to threaten human dignity (Umaru 2019). On the one hand, corruption has become almost the surest way to acquire quick riches even when such practices are done at the expense of others. On the contrary, the non-recognition of human dignity makes ethical living almost a concept that is far from realisation. Such choices make ethical living unattainable. As such, we deny ourselves and others, especially those that would come after we are no more–the future generation, a better society that provides ethical standards to guide them toward ethical living. While those happenings are concerning to the vulnerable members of majority African communities, those at the helm of leadership continue to show little to no concern in salvaging them.

The quest for salvaging ethical living in such contexts requires agreement from various social contexts on moral values that could provide a basis for cooperation. This is the reason why (de Villiers 2018:199) disagrees with Weber's insistence on a charismatic political leader as a sole agent of the ethic of responsibility; he calls it "unacceptably elitist" because it excludes other role-players in or outside of politics. Instead, he opines

for the collaboration of different stakeholders "who do not only instigate and support programmes to root out corruption and strengthen ethical behaviour but are interested to personally be models by their own incorruptibility and moral integrity" (de Villiers 2018:226). One interesting thing about de Villiers' inclusion of different stakeholders is that they are not called to only set standards by which others would follow. Rather, they are called to be what they expect of others themselves. That idea echoes what Kure (2020) described as a feature of responsible leadership. Hence, those stakeholders stand a chance of exerting positive influence for the good in society, thereby enhancing ethical living.

De Villiers' quest for a contemporary Christian ethic of responsibility goes beyond insisting on reviving ethical living, but also by making a proposal of what should characterise such an ethic. The features of a contemporary Christian ethic of responsibility which shall be outlined later have some contextual characters. One of these characters is that they are coming from a Christian theologian who is an African, thus, making it important to evaluate those features to see how they speak to an African Christian community, on the one hand, and how they address Africa's impending issues mentioned above on the other. The aim of such efforts, de Villiers (2018:209) declares, is to "effectively and appropriately deal with the undermining of ethical living in contemporary societies," which is the reason why he describes the contemporary Christian ethic of responsibility as "a second level normative ethical approach".[1] Secondly, de Villiers (2018:210) sees this ethic as a "second-level" normative ethical approach because it seeks to "provide guidance on taking responsibility for the effective and appropriate enhancement of ethical living in all spheres of life in contemporary societies."

A careful consideration of the two instances above presents us with a guideline on the implication of de Villiers' features of a contemporary Christian ethic of responsibility in the African context. Furthermore, they serve as a roadmap to engaging an African reader to reimagine an ethic of responsibility and its application in enhancing the promotion of societal moral fabric. Of equal importance is the understanding of the experiences

1 See de Villiers (2018:209) for further discussion on why he describes the contemporary Christian ethic of responsibility as a second level ethical approach.

that shaped de Villers' formative academic life (see Umaru 2020:178). From those experiences, de Villiers, however, did not allow them to influence his thinking away from speaking against societal ills that ravaged South Africa during the apartheid era. Rather, he made his voice count by engaging with societal issues to the extent of making a proposal for a contemporary Christian ethic of responsibility discussed below.

Firstly, de Villiers describes the contemporary Christian ethic of responsibility as an "in-between-ethic" (2018:214). This idea suggests the variations already in existence in ethics where this new idea could fit in-between. De Villiers recognized this well when he made clear his intention that the contemporary Christian ethic of responsibility does not aim at "competing with other versions of normative ethics and striving to replace them." Rather, "it acknowledges and works with existing first-level normative ethical systems irrespective of their nature" (de Villiers 2018:214). Also of interest is de Villiers' declaration that this ethic does not aim to provide all answers to the fundamental question of "why be moral" (2018:214). This suggests that the contemporary Christian ethic of responsibility does not aim at claiming superiority over the existing first level normative ethics in a sense. Rather, it seeks to make contribution to the existing discussions, particularly toward answering the fundamental question of what it means to be moral. Hence, the proposal holds on two promises; firstly, as an in-between ethic, contemporary Christian ethic of responsibility fits in-between the enterprise of providing a rationale for being moral and acting morally, and the enterprise of dealing with, and implementing first level normative ethical principles. Secondly, it provides guidelines which should be heeded in dealing with and implementing first level normative ethical principles (2018:214). Therefore, he issues a warning that "although ethics of responsibility has relevance for the manner in which applied ethics is executed, it should be equated with applied ethics because it does not offer solutions to applied ethical issues" (2018:214).

De Villiers considers the "focus area" as another feature of the contemporary Christian ethic of responsibility (2018:215). By "focus area," de Villiers outlines what he considers to be the most important aspect of life and society that the contemporary Christian ethic of responsibility should pay particular attention to. In doing so, de Villiers clearly states the climax of an ethic of responsibility as that which deals with "any new issue related

to the understanding of ethical living that emerges in contemporary societies" (2018:215). Citing one of the examples of a relatively new issue in this regard is what he sees as "the difficulty experienced in contemporary societies with retrospectively holding specific agents morally and legally responsible for crimes committed in the past" (2018:215). If that is all the contemporary societies' focus with regards to the application of the ethic of responsibility, de Villiers describes it as "unwise" (2018:215). Instead, he advances the cause that other focus areas be considered in the discourse. Hence, de Villiers agrees to retain two views that Weber had suggested in this regard, namely, dealing responsibly with values and, secondly, dealing responsibly with ethical decision-making as the focus areas of a contemporary ethic of responsibility (2018:215).

Dealing with values has a greater influence on any or most decision-making processes. While these values vary from where they originate, the same goes to how they are understood and applied to decision-making processes in contemporary society. Values, like morals, have variation in understanding and application. In his works on "thick and thin: moral argument at home and abroad" (Walzer 1994) presents the idea of two sets of morals, namely: thick and thin. He refers to thick moral values as local, complex moral codes found in each society. Indeed, they are moral values that specifically apply to individual context or persons, examples include orientation to time, power distance, individualism vs collectivism, gender egalitarianism, etc. These moral values are not universally acceptable in all societies because they are differently understood and applied. On the contrary, a few examples of moral values that could be considered universal include fairness, truth, justice, etc. These values are placed above human divisive construction such as race, religion, and class. They are applicable to societies with a good sense of common good. These two variations, however, suggest that dealing with values and decision-making within specific and universal communities requires scrutiny. Additionally, speaking from an African context, Wiredu (1996), in "cultural universals and particulars" made further emphasis in support of variation of contexts. He sees an unprecedented intensification of informational interaction among the different cultures in the world which involves an "increasing scepticism regarding the possibility of universal canons of thought and action" (1996:1). For Wiredu, the resultant effect of such scepticism is "the display

of extreme abstemiousness with respect to claims of universality because of self-critical recoiling from the earlier intellectual self-aggrandizement of the West" (1996:1). Despite those threats, people previously marginalised find the need, in seeking to redefine their self-identity to insist on particulars rather than universals.

The third feature de Villiers proposes for the contemporary Christian ethic of responsibility is the "levels of operation" (2018:225). He takes this idea to present his thoughts beyond Weber who had earlier advocated for a charismatic political leader as the sole agent for the ethic of responsibility. While de Villiers agrees with Weber in the sense of having levels of operation, he emphasises on the need for involving more and wider stakeholders in the discussion. Hence, he suggests two levels of operation for a contemporary Christian ethic of responsibility.

The first level of operation, de Villiers calls "theoretical level" (2018:225). At this level, de Villiers aims at organizations such as industries and research sectors such as empirical analysis by social scientists, critical philosophical reflection, as well as social and psychological research. The aim of involving these stakeholders is to "gain insight into the impact that factors at work in these contexts have on ethical living today" (2018:225). This echoes the translation from theoretical analysis to practical implications on ethical living, hence igniting consciousness toward collaboration between the academy and the public. It is such collaboration between the academia and the public that could guarantee sensitivity and signifies the implication of knowledge and its practical application.

The second level of operation, de Villiers calls "practical level" (2018:226). This level functions to enable adequate adherence to the previous level of operation already mentioned. The practical level maintains that the theoretical level is dysfunctional until theories are conveniently converted to practical terms. By that application, the theories propounded by academic institutions are converted and interpreted appropriately to address values and deal with ethical decision-making in contemporary societies. As de Villiers affirms, "all the theoretical inputs are to no avail if the insights gained are not effectively implemented at a practical level in the everyday lives and activities of individuals, communities, organisations, companies, and governments" (2018:226). The point here is the relevance

of converting theoretical views to practical steps to ensure that the conception of ethical values and dealing with ethical decision-making is understood to be applied. The resultant effect of this agrees with de Villiers' quest for enhancing ethical living by personally setting an example, and by inspiring, teaching, and motivating other people (2018:226). This idea shifts human imagination that is keenly prescriptive of what others must do without getting involved themselves hence devalues people's trust, especially in dealing with ethical decision-making and the enhancement of ethical living.

Another feature of the contemporary Christian ethic of responsibility is the "agents" (2018:226). We have noted earlier how de Villiers chose to go further than Weber with regards to agency in the ethic of responsibility discourse. For Weber, his insistence of a charismatic political leader is not, in de Villiers' view, sufficient to address ethical concerns of contemporary society. For de Villiers, the contemporary Christian ethic of responsibility should have "multiple agents operating on different levels and in different spheres" (2018:226). This feature is complementary to the previous one in that the agents referred here operate at different spheres including but not exclusively on theoretical and practical levels. Rather, they have leadership capacity. While Weber emphasises on a charismatic political leader, de Villiers considers leadership from other spheres such as religious sectors as well.

However, it is important to note that Weber's designation of a charismatic political leader was based on some presumption which de Villiers highlights below. The first presumption is that "modern politics has replaced religion as the dominant social order and thus has taken over the responsibility to provide ethical cohesion and direction to the nation" (2018:197). This assumption came after Christian ethics was considered insufficient in Weber's time to offer responsible guidance. Such assumption, coupled with Weber's critical concern on the German politics of his day, perhaps enabled him to have faith in a charismatic political leader over Christian ethics. It could also be deduced that such presumption was influenced by Weber's interest in partisan politics which he unfortunately could not fully get himself (see Ringer 2004). It could be contented that Weber seeks to sanitise the German political context of his day to prepare a better political ground for himself and others with whom they could provide the political

leadership that was lacking. Attesting to the above presumption, Umaru (2020:129) suggests that "such efforts were to ensure the appropriation of what political leadership entails and, to explain the expected role of the political leader."

Here we could deduce that Weber's sole confidence falls on a charismatic political leader as an appropriate agent of the ethic of responsibility. However, after classifying the ethic of responsibility as a "contemporary Christian ethic," de Villiers is convinced that it requires more agents than just a charismatic political leader. One reason for engaging more agents in the ethic of responsibility is the realisation of the need for proper leadership in many spheres of human interaction in contemporary society. As de Villiers affirms, "We have to admit that leadership, including political leadership, remains important when it comes to the implementation of the ethic of responsibility" (2018:226). This is because de Villiers is convinced that the enhancement of ethical living today would become a daunting task when we fail to realise that leaders from different angles have important roles to play. It is a misplacement of purpose, one must say, when segregation instead of collaboration amongst leaders from different spheres of life becomes so common in contemporary societies with variation of challenges. To this, one could suggest, it is better when people are united with a common vision to achieve greater success than when they are in isolation.[2] In that case, it was concluded in a study that a contemporary ethic of responsibility that seeks to speak to a diversified society, or that seeks to address different challenges confronting the contemporary society, must take into consideration the need of calling together for collaboration (see Umaru, 2020). An example was seen in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa where two leaders, Nelson Mandela, and Bishop Desmond Tutu, played significant roles. They "played an important role in ensuring a peaceful transition to the new democratic society in the early nineties by proclaiming the message of reconciliation and instigating programmes to bring about reconciliation in society, setting an inspiring example to the people of South Africa" (2018:226). These leaders, de Villiers calls "charismatic leaders" (2018:226).

---

2 See Veldsman (2020) for more on the necessity of having united forces toward a particular goal.

A similar level of collaboration of various stakeholders could be discussed from the Nigerian context as argued in Umaru (2020). From the context, it is argued together with de Villiers that different stakeholders are required in addressing ethical issues therein. In a study, Umaru (2020) argues for ways to combat corruption that continues to undermine the human dignity of Nigerians in different forms. In this study, it was found that combating corruption is not carried out by one individual or organisation. Rather, different agencies and personalities are involved in the process. Hence, an indication that these organisations and persons become charismatic leaders in the context of the ongoing discussion. This is so because they collectively strive toward achieving the goal of having a society free of corruption, on the one hand, which, on the contrary, results in the recognition and enhancement of human dignity. For one reason, it is to ensure that each of these stakeholders have a better understanding of the concepts. That way, methods could be adopted that yield a reasonable amount of success toward one common enemy. This, also, strengthens de Villiers' disagreement with Weber's sole charismatic political leader in addressing ethical living.

Insistence on one sole leader would not only result in unsuccessful attempts in addressing ethical living in the African context but could result in some form of divisiveness since the African person upholds the notion of communality over individualism seriously. So, the essence of having combined forces does not aim to express that which is the strongest or which makes the biggest contribution. Rather, what matters most is "the contribution that each makes toward a common good" (Umaru 2020:249). The first point of emphasis is knowing the problem which, in the argument of de Villiers' ethic of responsibility, is the enhancement of ethical living in contemporary societies. In the context of Nigeria, however, it is the daunting challenge of corruption on human dignity. Hence, application of an ethic of responsibility ceases from being a daunting task with the focus made clearer. That becomes a boost to the notion of engaging different stakeholders than just holding unto the charismatic political leader that Weber proposed.

While the involvement of different agents is promising in the contemporary Christian ethic of responsibility discourse, it is necessary that these different stakeholders understand that their inclusion is a call for responsibility. As a reminder, de Villiers (2018:226) has already warned that the multiple

agents must "personally set examples by their own incorruptibility and moral integrity in the promotion of common good." Without setting themselves apart here this would justify why Weber had dismissed the involvement of Christian ethics in his discourse on ethics of responsibility. But also, the identification of the charismatic political leader does not depict total innocence as was in the case of Adolf Hitler in Germany, a few years after Weber had died. Neither does it justify that religious, economic, traditional, political, nor ethnic stakeholder who depicts their innocence from acting otherwise as irresponsible. Rather, all stakeholders must come with neutrality on the notion to serve for the common good of society. They must come with clean hands. That way, they replace a somewhat notion of "personal gains at the expense of others" with willingness to service. They are oriented to appropriately use power not coercively but for the protection of the most vulnerable thereby restoring hope and confidence amidst the global whirlwind threatening human wellbeing.

The last feature of the contemporary Christian ethic of responsibility that de Villiers proposes is the "mode of operation" (2018:227). From the previous feature discussed above, it could be assumed that the involvement of different stakeholders suggests an accommodative dimension of some extreme views there might be. That is the very idea de Villiers distances from a contemporary Christian ethic of responsibility. This is because he acknowledges the possibilities that there could be "extreme views, or the instigation of extreme practices in society" (de Villiers, 2018:227). When this happens, de Villiers insists that an ethic of responsibility could adopt an "activist," "confrontational stance" (2018:227) rather than an accommodative mode. He makes this clear stance because of the presence of "thick" and "thin" moral values in contemporary societies. One of the reasons for this is the politics of power-seeking for dominance, with consideration of the implications of such actions in the enhancement of the common good.

The peculiarity of such extreme fundamentalist views could be found very active in the Nigerian context because of its multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and contested religious setting. Undoubtedly, the tendency of enforcing extreme views in that context is routine. On the one end, the contested religious Nigerian context is often found in series of conflicts between the two majority religious groups namely, the Christian and Muslim faiths.

From political appointments, there have always been sentiments whenever the authority is led by any of the two sides. With justification of such actions, some religious tenets are sometimes used to defend the reasons for having extreme views of favouring one side over the other. In terms of ethnicity and regionality, on the contrary, there is often agitation that one side has more productive force than the other, hence should be favoured over others. In such a context, it becomes extremely difficult that the ethic of responsibility adopts an accommodative model. Instead, de Villiers puts it better that in a "situation where the functionalist denial of any moral considerations in a particular social order or organisation is proclaimed or practiced, or the fundamentalist absolutizing of one particular set of thick moral values is proclaimed or enforced in society" (de Villiers 2018:228). In a context with the above description, it is certainly applicable to agree with de Villiers to either adopt a confrontational, activist, or even prophetic model of engagement in addressing what could be at stake.

Let us look further in place of the prophetic theological model of engagement in the contemporary ethic of responsibility discourse in conversation with John de Gruchy, one of South African's doyens in theological discourse. From a nutshell, de Gruchy (1991:220) describes prophetic theology as a "critical engagement that recognizes the "signs of the times and the demand these make upon the life and witness of the church". Although this statement was made to express the functional role of the church in speaking within the context of apartheid injustices, it still could be applied in dealing with ethical living in the contemporary ethic of responsibility discourses. This forms one of the reasons why de Gruchy describes that prophetic theology has taken a new direction in a climate of rapid change today, particular in discourses within the South African post-apartheid era when the foundations of white privilege and power are being shaken and new foundations are being laid and the building of a new nation was underway. In such a difficult context, de Gruchy (1991:220) insists that the task of doing theology remains a demanding and exacting one. It is difficult because diverse views both within and outside religious circles hold different views on thick and moral values. Additionally, the task of doing theology becomes hard when it deals with extreme cultural norms that consistently demand subjugation at the expense of others. In that regard, the contemporary ethic of responsibility that seeks to deal

with ethical living and addresses ethical decision-making cannot be an accommodative model but either a confrontational, or activist model as its propagative mode. In the opinion of de Gruchy, it would mean that such an ethic adopts a prophetic theological mode of engagement. This is because it understands the signs of the times and their demands.

The discussion so far in this article has focused on outlining the features of a contemporary ethic of responsibility de Villiers proposes. Indeed, the features look promising when properly understood and applied. However, as one of the aims of this article is to contextualise de Villiers' proposal in the African context and, if possible, make some recommendations, the remaining part of the article is dedicated to that. The reason for contextualising these thoughts is firstly, to make them more accessible to an African reader in order to apply them in their immediate context and, secondly, to bring into conversation some thoughts by other African scholars on the subject matter.

## 2. Ethic of responsibility and de Villiers' views in context.

The aim of this section is not undermining what de Villiers has done in his approach to the contemporary Christian ethic of responsibility. Rather, it gears toward appreciating his incredible work, being the first theologian in the African context to have written substantially on the subject matter. But also, I aim to bring his ideas close to the African context for easy accessibility and applicability in addressing the daunting challenges confronting the context.

The point of departure is the use and application of technology and its effects on humanity and nature. In that sense, I shall be conversing with Bénézet Bujo, who is both a priest and a theologian and his important thoughts on the ethic of responsibility. He is not only writing as an African theologian and priest but uses some concepts that are very much applicable and accessible to an African reader of the ethic of responsibility. Surprisingly, in de Villiers' engagement with scholars in this aspect such as Hans Jonas, he did not mention nor engage this rich theological perspective from the African context. This becomes one of the critical evaluations made in de Villiers' work that we need some recommendations going forward.

Bujo (1998) in *The ethical dimension of community: The African model and the dialogue between North and South* outlines two concepts from which we shall build our argument. The first of these is the language of nature and, secondly, the dialogue with non-Western cultures of the world. Let me consider these variables one after the other.

It is no longer news that modern technology has both been a blessing and is responsible for some damages in human relations. On the one hand, technology has created what de Villiers calls "responsible gap," making it very difficult for people to know and fulfil their moral responsibility (de Villiers 2002:16). He insists that modern technology has, ironically, also led to an increase in the number and the gravity of the risks facing humans. Modern technology has had an ambiguous effect from the start de Villiers (2002:17). Other scholars such as Jonas (1984) in *The Imperative of Responsibility* also attributed the concerns of modern technology to the wellbeing of nature here and now but also for the future. Their meeting point is the concerns that modern technology poses difficulty that traditional ethics cannot address. While the above submission is considered appropriate to curtail the negative impact of modern technology on human wellbeing and moral responsibility gap, Bujo (1998) has a different view that is contextually relevant in the African context.

Bujo (1998) starts interrogating the ethic of silence purported by the technologically oriented world and the danger it causes both to nature in general, but to the majority world. His view is that the use of modern technology has failed to listen to the symbolic language of nature, the notion which is so important to an African. In Bujo's view, since an African sees the forest as precisely "the place where life originates and develops, whoever respects the forest masters the art of defeating death" (1998:217). Such is an illustration that human concerns, particularly in the African context, are multi-dimensional. The destruction of nature for the benefit of humans indirectly affects humans because of the interconnectedness within creation. That would, in turn, intensify the responsibility gap which de Villiers worries about. Hence, Bujo (1998:216) laments that only "when the technologically-oriented world listens to the symbolic language of nature, it will become literate once more and be able to promote life instead of death."

The second point that Bujo considers is the call for dialogue with non-Western cultures. Communication that results in clearer understanding of people's values and cultures efficiently goes a long way in addressing issues confronting humans and their contexts. In that sense, Bujo is of the opinion that the Western use of modern technology continues to cause devastating effects on the majority world's population with little to no concern from the perpetrators. The concern to be considered here is that human and societal wellbeing goes beyond the quest for profit-oriented technology and power of money. Rather, the recognition of their humanity and what makes living a worthwhile adventure. One option Bujo suggests could address this dilemma is through dialogue between people of different contexts. The implications of such dialogues, Bujo (1998:218) posits, is to "warn humanity not to demonstrate its domination of the world in a deadly manner." That demonstrates an affirmation of the harm that modern technology brings on humanity and nature. However, addressing specifically the Africa context, we see that "today's dramatic consequences of technology should encourage the African population to reconsider and not abandon its cultural heritage so quickly" (1998:218).

What Bujo brings to our knowledge regarding the challenge that modern technology causes on humanity and nature is twofold. Firstly, the failure to listen to the language of nature and its concerns and, secondly the need for dialogue between the majority world population– that is often at the receiving end – and their non-Western counterparts. Taking the dialogical aspect further, it both affirms one of de Villiers' features of the contemporary ethic of responsibility that calls for the involvement of multiple agents. Similarly, the concept of dialogue was considered a necessary tool in addressing the challenge of corruption on human dignity in the Nigerian context. The study holds that because of its multi-religious, and multi-ethnic diversity, an ethic of responsibility must consider constructive dialogue among the different parties (Umaru, 2020:249). This view of dialogue, I think, goes beyond context but should involve human persons, including scholars, and their rich ideas. In the African context, for instance, collaboration amongst scholars from different parts on specific issues could strengthen and make our research richer and contextually relevant to addressing the immediate concerns befalling us. The idea of collaboration mentioned here, however, does not nullify the stance on confrontational approaches in addressing

societal issues in the African context, but seeks to strengthen the ongoing discussion.

Furthermore, the view that ideas be contextualised suggests a particular way of decolonisation. In this case, decolonization does not refer to Africanisation, as Mbembe (2015) sees it. Rather, it is, as Fanon (2008) [1952] states "about reshaping, turning human beings once again into craftsmen and craftswomen who, in the reshaping matters and forms, needed not to look at the pre-existing models and needed not to use paradigms." It is about looking back at informing people about themselves and their respective contexts. Decolonisation understood in those terms goes beyond seeing as "merely a matter of political dependence" (Oelofsen 2015:131) to include physical structures built by the colonizers, and ideas exported from other context with the view of addressing issues peculiar to specific contexts. That way, colonization memories would gradually fade away to ensure a transformative mind that thinks differently and independently. Bringing these ideas into the contemporary ethic of responsibility discourse under review, we could agree with (Oelofsen 2015:131) that the "development of concepts with their roots in Africa has the prospect of working towards the decolonisation of the African mind and intellectual landscape." In context, bringing into conversation concepts such as "understanding the language of nature" in Bujo's view would have great impact in our appreciation and application of new concepts, particularly those having to do with values and ethical decision-making.

It is important to understand Bujo's view on dialogue with non-Western cultures of the world about issues confronting the African context. In this sense, the call to responsibly dealing with values and addressing ethical living takes a more engaging dimension. Hence, it provides a space to speak on the peculiarity of the African contexts.

## Conclusion

This paper's major concern was twofold. Firstly, to appreciate the tremendous work of Etienne de Villiers and his proposal for a contemporary Christian ethic of responsibility. On the second level, the article, having outlined de Villiers' work, contextualised his proposal in the African context. The

sole reason for this inquiry was to invite de Villiers' brilliant ideas into more contextual and accessible conversation in context. This was aimed at bringing into conversation some African authors that have written some ideas regarding the ethic of responsibility that de Villiers could not interact with or refer to. The implication of such oversight could result in an inadequate representation of the peculiar issues in the context, and how they are addressed.

Two concepts were mentioned from where the contextualising effect took stance. The first was the need to understand the language of nature, a concept with special meaning and application in the African context. The knowledge that life lives in nature makes it a prerequisite to nurture nature because then humanity is made alive. The second view has to do with dialogue with different stakeholders on matters that concern human and societal wellbeing. On this view, de Villiers' idea of involving more agents in ethic of responsibility discourse, and Umaru's idea of dialogue in a similar study on the Nigerian context, very much complemented Weber's view of a charismatic political leader. One thing here is a sense of agreement from three different authors referring to a specific idea within the African context. It affirms that the context is rich with ideas that only need to be explored. Just like de Villiers proposes the involvement of different stakeholders as suitable agents for an ethic of responsibility, it is wise if different scholars with similar viewpoints are brought into conversation as well. Then, we could have a contextual critical dialogue on how to address issues peculiar to the African context, particularly those involving ethical decision-making and ethical living.

## Bibliography

Bujo, B. 1998. *The ethical dimension of community: The African model of dialogue between North and South*. Nairobi, Kenya. Paulines Publications Africa.

De Gruchy, JW. 1991. South Africa Theology comes of age. *Religious Studies Review* 17(3):217–223.

De Villiers, E. 2002. Who Will Bear Moral Responsibility? *Communicatio* 28(1):12–21.

De Villiers, E. 2018. Revisiting Max Weber's Ethic of Responsibility. Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck.

Fanon, F. 2008 [1952]. *Black skin, white masks*, translated by R. Philcox.

Gbadegesin, S. 2004. *An outline of a theory of destiny.* In Brown, LM (editor), African Philosophy: New and Traditional Perspectives. Oxford: University Press. 51–68.

Gyekye, K. 1987. *An essay on African Philosophical thought: The Akan conceptual scheme*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Mbembe, A. 2015. Decolonising knowledge and the question of the archive. [Online]. Available: http://wiser.wits.ac.za/system/files/Achille.pdf.

Oelofsen, R. 2015. Decolonisation of the African mind and intellectual landscape. *Phronimon* 16(2):130–146.

Ringer, F. 2004. *Max Weber: an intellectual biography.* Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

Umaru, KK. 2019. Corruption as a threat to human dignity: Some reflections on the Nigerian situation. In Agang, SB; Pillay, P; Jones, C; (editors). *A multidimensional perspective on corruption in Africa: wealth, power, religion, and democracy.* Newcastle, UK. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp, 224–240.

Umaru, KK. 2020. *Corruption, human dignity, and an ethic of responsibility in Nigeria: A theological-ethical study.* PhD Dissertation: Stellenbosch University, South Africa.

Veldsman, D. 2020. Science. In Agang, SB.; Hendriks, HJ.; & Forster, DA (editors.). *African Public Theology.* Jos, Nigeria: Langham partnership: Hippo Books.175–187.

Villa-Vicencio, C. 2009. *Walk with Us and Listen: Political Reconciliation in Africa*. Cape Town, South Africa. University of Cape Town Press.

Walzer, M. 1994. Thick and thin: moral argument at home and abroad. Noter Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame University Press.

Wiredu, K. 1996. Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.