National Partiality and Global Justice: A Response to Communitarian Particularism

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B00725452

Word Count:

4814

Submission to the 2020 Mushkat Memorial Essay Prize
Abstract

In this paper I attempt to show the proper role of national partiality in relation to issues of global justice. A key subject in the debate about the legitimacy and scope of cosmopolitanism, raised particularly by its communitarian critics, hinges on what I identify as competing intuitions about principles of fairness. I mainly focus my response to Michael Walzer and Alasdair MacIntyre who represent paradigm cases of the communitarian critique, offering positive alternatives in partiality to one’s own community. I employ the principles of fairness to counter the former’s attribution of regulatory basis to the particularity of the nature of exchange, and repudiate the latter’s rooting of justice in community. Next, I show that projects committed to reducing the uniquely political character of justice to any other realm, whether it be morality, the community, or sovereignty, are objectionable. Lastly, I discuss the relevance of national partiality to global distributive justice. I argue that nations are still the most powerful and effective vehicles capable of undertaking projects of global distributive justice. Tolerance and goodwill among nations is indispensable to projects of distributive justice. I ask: Can we steer away from unnecessary dichotomies of nation against world, and build international links of amity over secure foundations of national prosperity?

Keywords: Justice, Just, Distribution, Cosmopolitanism, Communitarianism, Ethics, Morality, Community, Political Theory, Philosophy, Partiality, Fairness, Fair, Principles, Nations, World, Global
National Partiality and Global Justice: A Response to Communitarian Particularism

In this paper I attempt to show the proper role of national partiality in relation to issues of global justice. A key subject in the debate about the legitimacy and scope of cosmopolitanism, raised particularly by its communitarian critics, hinges on what I identify as the competing intuitions about principles of fairness. Any robust approach addressing issues of global justice needs to integrate and harmonize these principles in its project. Positions that fail to accomplish this feat are vulnerable to refutation for their deficiency, shortsightedness, or both.

I believe that a viable cosmopolitan project for global issues of distributive justice would be built upon ongoing national commitments. Such a commitment would ensure that goodwill among nations and peoples can be built on a foundation of tolerance towards their particularity and diversity of political initiatives. National distributive systems, as exemplars of such initiatives, are the best and most powerful means of reaching global justice. As the most powerful and effective actors globally, nations are indispensable. Steering away from unnecessary dichotomies of nation against world, international links of amity can be founded and strengthened over the secure foundations of national prosperity.

I argue against reducing the unique character of distributive justice to any other realm, whether it be the community in the communitarian approach, morality as in the utilitarian approach, or sovereignty in the statist approach. Specifically, I oppose the views of Michael Walzer and Alasdair MacIntyre who represent paradigm cases of the communitarian critique, offering positive alternatives in partiality to one’s own community. Briefly, Walzer defends

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1 Cosmopolitans argue for some sense of “community among all human beings, regardless of social and political affiliation” (Kleingeld & Brown, 2019). When it comes to global distributive justice, cosmopolitanism “focuses not merely on the moral duties of individuals or on the political relations among states, but on the justice of social institutions world-wide and the measures required to attain it” (Kleingeld & Brown, 2019).

2 Communitarians argue that “the standards of justice must be found in forms of life and traditions of particular societies and hence can vary from context to context” (Bell, 2016). As such, communitarianism precludes universal and global conceptions of justice.
pluralism against any global sense of justice, while MacIntyre sees nothing overriding or going beyond the interests and needs of one’s community. I employ the principles of fairness to counter the former’s attribution of regulatory basis to the particularity of the nature of exchange, and repudiate the latter’s rooting of justice in community. The constraints of this paper do not allow for the full presentation of either theorists’ account, but the main points of contention will be drawn to attention. I begin by introducing the conflicted nature of competing intuitions applicable to different spheres of social distribution. Then, I will explore the conditions for the project of justice. This is followed by an analysis of the role of national partiality in addressing issues of global justice before concluding remarks.

**Competing Intuitions and Social Distribution**

In *The Flavours of Fairness*, Laura Niemi (2019) discusses her research in studying the moral cognition behind people’s judgements of fairness by focusing on three commonly observed principles of fairness that guide moral judgements. The investigation focuses on how each position relates to individual differences in interpersonal orientation in the context of scarce resource allocation. The guiding principles are identified as “reciprocity—returning favors, charity—helping those in need, and impartiality—remaining blind to personal attributes” (Niemi & Young, 2017, pp. 438-439). These competing principles can lead to dilemmas across public and private situations. Reciprocity and charity involve personal considerations, “the unique past deeds and current needs of potential recipients,” whereas impartial allocation relies on a consistent application of rules such as a “standardized” impersonal criteria (Niemi, 2019, p. 29). As Rawls and thinkers like him would have predicted, impartiality was commonly found to be the fairest principle (Niemi, 2019, p. 30). No less, some studies show “people disdain creating partiality so much, they throw excess resources they are tasked with distributing into the rubbish
to maintain equality” (Niemi, 2019). Impartiality was found to be optimally fair, just as morally praiseworthy as charity, while demanding far less theory of mind activity\(^3\) than both reciprocity and charity for moral evaluation (Niemi, 2019). Clearly, in the absence of information on personal attributes the only “prototypically fair” principle would be impartiality (Niemi & Young, 2017, p. 447). It is perceived to be more motivated by the interests of the group rather than individuals, and by reliable procedures rather than emotions (Niemi, 2019, p. 34).

Charity was found to be equally praiseworthy but less fair than impartiality (Niemi, 2019, p. 31). The psychological facility for “the empathetic concern” allows for the integration of the principle of charity into the understanding of fairness (Niemi, 2019). Charity could be approached either from an equality standpoint of impartiality or from the desire to build long-standing ties with exchange partners by reciprocity (Niemi & Young, 2017, p. 447).

Reciprocity was believed “to be the least fair, and the least morally praiseworthy allocation method” (Niemi, 2019, p. 31). Many dyadic relationships are founded on reciprocity. But, in outside relationships, like friendships, where competing interests bid for resources, reciprocity builds exclusive ties that benefit a select few (Niemi, 2019).

This presents a meta-ethical challenge. It invites “rival accounts of morality” to be taken as suitable according to certain “independently identifiable phenomenon […] in the social world […] to be described […] by the contending parties” (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 11). If the aforementioned findings are generalizable to the wider moral landscape of humanity, then “rival and competing” sets of belief may commonly be found, perhaps universally, in the larger human population (Is Patriotism a Virtue?, 1984, p. 7).

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\(^3\)’Theory of Mind’ refers to the cognitive capacity to attribute mental states to self and others (Goldman, 2012, p. 2).
Secondly, individuals with different interpersonal orientations and organizations promoting varying associative tendencies may take systematically different views on fairness, while each of these values may become more salient across diverse relationships and times of life (Niemi & Young, 2017, pp. 446,448). This is because the psychological and interpersonal tendencies of individuals are believed to be the culprit, not their constitution and sustenance “within a community” (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 10). This variation in different people’s intuitions is observed within, and not simply between, communities.

Fairness may mean different things in different contexts, even within a community, for different individuals and organizations. These systematically different views on fairness may be just why the moral import of the “global village” is still fully “unrecognized” (Singer, 1972, p. 232). Individual differences in interpersonal orientation call for alternative approaches to justification. Here, common patterns of moral intuition is presented. All three principles play a role in responses to questions of fairness. This is particularly relevant given how the context of the study is the allocation of scarce resources, which is the central issue of concern in debates about global justice as “socio-economic justice” (Nagel, 2005, p. 114). Curiously, these principles, as so identified, play the roles assigned to them in divergent spheres of social exchange to guide moral intuitions in different combinations, and perhaps to different degrees.

The divergent spheres of social life brings us to Michael Walzer (1983), who abstains from appealing to universal principles and instead highlights "the particularism of history, culture, and membership" (pp. 4-5). He criticizes the general impulse to seek “some underlying unity” or “a single criterion, or a single set of interconnected criteria” that rightly encompasses all distributive systems (Walzer, 1983). For Walzer, issues of distributive justice cannot be addressed from behind a “veil of ignorance,” or any abstract position, but from “the appropriate
setting” of membership in a “political community” in which common culture and understanding about justice may be presumed (Walzer, 1983, p. 28). He argues for a form of justice with a plurality of principles, each serving “its place, along with many others, uneasily coexisting, invoked by competing groups, confused with one another” (Walzer, 1983, p. 4). In the case of resource allocation, “different social goods ought to be distributed for different reasons, in accordance with different procedures, by different agents” (Walzer, 1983, p. 6). What is fascinating is how the abovementioned principles of fairness could account for this professed difference.

As Walzer argues, the divergent spheres of social life are not only the “product of historical and cultural particularism,” but are differentiated by the very principles that guide them (Walzer, 1983, p. 6). For him, principles like free exchange, merit, and need exemplify the forces that make up the range of just distribution (Walzer, 1983, p. 21). Each principle is appropriate under the “particular distributive sphere” that it generates (Walzer, 1983, p. 26). And yet, he takes social goods to be justly “shared, divided, and exchanged across political frontiers” only, since “the political community is probably the closest we can come to a world of common meanings” (Walzer, 1983, p. 28). But what is particular to a political community as opposed to the particular type of distributive sphere is not the same. This vagueness and inconsistency is a ploy, for as soon as I consider the *bazaar* and the *agorai* as both forms of the *marketplace*, I have appealed to something not so particular. It is every type, and not every particular exchange, that is “a revelation of social meaning” (Walzer, 1983, p. 21).

Similarly, the fact of my encountered goods “here, among these particular people, in these particular relationships,” does not limit me to their particular instances (Is Patriotism a Virtue?, 1984, p. 9). One might as well assert that walking is itself never encountered outside
particular instances of it here, among these two feet, in this particular way. Particular contingencies of experience do not limit the mind. Much like other social animals, humans have a basic understanding of what motherhood is, regardless of their particular experiences of it. Generally speaking, people learn about motherhood on the receiving end of the relationship, very much like other spheres of distribution. However, this does not rob them of engaging with such relationships under different roles.

Any approach that seeks its grounding in the particular culture and tradition of “this” community must paradoxically tackle the legacy of liberalism and its cosmopolitan associates. The intellectual influence and popularity of thinkers such as John Rawls, John Stuart Mill or Peter Singer attests to the resonant force of their message being widely shared. It is “this” cultural context that accommodates the conditions for their language of universal, ahistorical reason and individualism. To primarily commit to our own particular community is to commit to a community that also champions its principles in universal terms. This may be applicable to all political communities, national or otherwise, for even particularism is practiced in heterogeneous contexts. Recognizing the particularity of our own situation should not prevent us from noticing similarities, nor should respect for diversity of communities prevent us to make transferable prescriptions. What needs to be settled is the transitive relations of each sphere of exchange.

What can the abovementioned principles of fairness disclose about different spheres of social life? What types of exchange do these three principles of fairness belong to? Here are three divergent spheres of social life:

1. Market economy relations instantiated by the principles of impartiality (guided by commodity prices dependent on supply and demand, and not personal attributes) and reciprocity (the relationship between buyer and seller).
2. *Interpersonal* bond relations, such as family, friendship and others, instantiated by charity (the need of a child for care, the need for affection, etc.) and reciprocity (caring for elderly parents, gift giving and generosity, empathy).

3. *Public* interest relations, encompassing social institutions, instantiated by charity (the need for public goods, scarce resources and power) and impartiality (consistent and steady application of fair and impersonal standard rules, avoidance of discrimination based on prejudice and irrelevant personal and social attributes).

Each sphere of social life is guided by its own particular principles to maintain the kind of distributive role that it plays. It may be true that within each of these three spheres the degree to which any principle is active varies contextually, or that other principles play a significant role. However, it is the significant regulatory force of such principles guiding each sphere that ultimately differentiates it from any other form of social exchange.

Misunderstanding the importance of these principles in each case results in the corruption or transformation of relationships. This can be shown by asking whether, in a family, it is fair for a good mother to divide her care equally between her infant and teenage children. In a friendship, is it fair for someone to only take and not give support? Surely not. Evidently, charity and reciprocity guide these relationships. Similarly, market economy relations are believed to be unfair due to profiteering, collusion, and other anti-competitive practices, or because of fraud, theft, and other criminal activities which distort the role of principles. Above all, for the sake of global justice, what would it mean for any fair public project to ignore the principle of charity or impartiality? Can a fair social plan disregard the needs for which it allocates resources? Can a fair public institution systematically discriminate or capriciously change rules and policy? Surely
not. Fairness of public projects, such as any governmental plan or institution, is evaluated by its commitments to impartial regulations to address public needs.

How these principles conveniently pair up to account for different social distributions in each sphere suggests that there may after all be some underlying “set of interconnected criteria” for evaluation (Walzer, 1983, pp. 4-3). The question is, how can we conceive of and approach global justice? Given that the force of one of the three principles is underestimated in each sphere, the appropriate combination becomes key.

Superficially, “socio” draws associations to the public interest and “economic” may imply the market. Yet, reciprocity is disparaged in the former whereas charity is undervalued in the latter. But, the central aim of global justice is to address as primary concern what individual human beings owe one another by considering a wide array of possible agents and organizations beyond borders (Brock, 2017, p. 1.1). Such obligations invoke the needs of these humans. What people need globally to live a fulfilling life, and why they need it, motivates distributive theories of global justice. Charity, then, plays a decisive role as a principle. The focus on individual human beings as members of humanity at large, beyond borders and the broad range of relevant agents and organizations, solicits impartiality instead of reciprocity. What individuals owe humanity is an impersonal matter of no direct reciprocal relation. The particularities of each case is not in question, but rather the affinities of the human predicament. Nor is the motivation necessarily to pay back or pay forward what humanity provided us. It is, instead, a question of standards of fairness for all humans qua humans. Impartiality and charity are, thus, pivotal. But how can global justice be differentiated from other public projects? For this, justice needs to be shown to be different than other sorts of public affair.
In Search of Justice

How exactly justice is understood is a crucial step in approaching global justice. Often enough, justice is understood in a multiplicity of ways in different contexts (Miller, 2017). As mentioned above, different spheres of social distribution are guided by different principles of fairness. However, justice is not simply one more form of social relation, nor is the measure of the quality fairness in each relationship. By drawing inspiration from T.M. Scanlon’s phrase, “what we owe each other”, and from the Institutes of Justinian’s idea of “the constant and perpetual will to render to each his due,” I will stress what I understand to be relevant about justice here.

First, what “we” and “each” indicates is the conditions for any project of justice in contrast to the broader conception of fairness. Justice is a project only conceivable in, and committed by, the third-person perspective as the impartial party. This means that in a world of only two individuals, justice may be conceivable but never attainable, since the conflict of interests would undermine the legitimacy of any impartial judgement. It cannot be part and parcel to the problem it seeks to address. This is a practical concern in many social situations where conflict of interests can compromise the process by demanding agents to play two conflicting social roles simultaneously. In the hypothetical case of the two, the interest to pass fair judgement for both is set against the partial self-interest of each. In no sense, other than in mutual agreement, would they be satisfied that the other’s judgement is fair while maintaining self-interest. Given that committing to unconditional selflessness would never be prudent, no justice seems attainable in such dispute. All the same, the situation may in fact resolve itself through certain behaviors, say by generosity, sympathy, or a sense of comradery, short of justice the agents and their outcome may befittingly be called fair or moral. Still, they cannot be just,
unless figuratively, because the means of justice are lacking. The conditions of resolving partial disputes or conflicts of interests (co-ordination or co-operation problems)\(^4\) by impartial agents marks the possibility of justice. Therefore, fair guidelines cannot be enough, such as settling matters by a coin flip. There needs to be effective means of settling disputes by an impartial agent. I propose justice, not as equivalent to fairness, but as a unique product of a fair and impartial social project.

Every community expresses some form of dissent, feud, or discord. This simply shows how justice cannot be reduced to mere morality either. The moral agent and the fair judge are not interchangeable roles, but the latter makes up a subset of the former. Justice can be delivered only when the interests of the judge do not impede his role, or conversely, enjoyed under consensus when it is not needed.

Second, justice is the product of a certain social arrangement of roles, benefits, and burdens. In “what we owe” and “will” we notice that claims of justice call for the obligation to enforce (Miller, 2017, p. 1.2). Enforcement is the role of justice. This is not to claim that every judgement is enforced, but that being enforceable is the defining feature. This way, justice connects claims to appropriate actions. Therefore, justice must be a comprehensive social project that subordinates the interests of others.

The subordination of the partial interests exemplifies a form of authority. This authority is not simply “the duty of citizens towards one another” driven from what the “sovereign power makes possible” (Nagel, 2005, p. 121). The sovereign power could itself be set against another agent or sovereign in a partial conflict interests, in which case an impartial third-party would be needed. Sovereign/state immunity is only a legal doctrine, not a general normative principle.

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\(^4\) I draw on the Rational Choice concepts: “Moral issues are partial conflicts of interests, moral resolutions, socially optimal, mutual advantageous solutions to these conflicts (MacIntoch, 1992, p. 152).”
Moreover, if the associative view were correct non-citizens would have no obligation to the legal, social, and economic institutions they are under, nor would international trade, treaty, IGOs and NGOs be able to appeal to or pool enough authority outside the state. Both in the international and domestic case the state of affairs suggests the contrary. It is not that there are no problems for authority, jurisdiction, and legitimacy. The point is that any project of justice, no less a global one, would have to manage enforceability. If global finance has found ways not to be confined by state sovereignty, so could and should global distributive justice.

Third, “what” kind of a claim justice addresses is about disputed and competing entitlements. The world of justice is a fair project of conflict-resolution. For global justice, the conflict is over the fair distribution of goods, resources, and power. Whatever arrangements would produce such a project, such as courts, assemblies, IGOs, NGOs or others, the outcome remains the same: the resolution of antagonisms.

The political theorist Chantal Mouffe (2016) understands the political as “the antagonistic dimension which is inherent in all human societies” (p. 2). She notes that the political may “take many forms and emerge in diverse social relations,” in contrast to politics proper which “refers to the ensembles of practices, discourses and institutions which seek to establish a certain order and to organize human coexistence” (Mouffe, 2016). Using this distinction, justice, as the project dedicated resolving antagonism, is inherently a political project. Yet, it is not a regime of politics that belongs to any particular institution or practice. Different avenues are open for concerns of justice, and it is delivered when antagonisms of struggling enemies become the “struggle between adversaries” (Mouffe, 2016, p. 8). The project of justice ends with this possibility, either resulting in hostility due to its failure or in civil discourse from its success.
Here, again, community, as the place for discourse, is ruled out from being the source of justice. Community needs justice as a prerequisite, not the other way around. Civil discourse is only possible in a community when hostility has been managed by justice. Antagonism as the problem of justice, its independent authority, plus its irreducibility to the project of morality portrays a picture of justice that stands above and beyond any dependency to other fields, be it culture, civil society, or community. Justice is a unique project of public interest, one that fairly and authoritatively regulates other fields and guarantees other social projects.

It is by now clear how Rawls, Walzer, and others who believe that there are no universally interchangeable principles of fairness are right to say that the “correct regulative principle for anything […] depends on the nature of that thing” (Rawls, 1971, p. 29). It should also become clear why community cannot by itself be considered a social good, no less “the most important good—that gets distributed” (Walzer, 1983). Access to, participation in, or enfranchisement within a community conditions the relations of exchange of that community, not the types of goods distributed. In this sense, women’s suffrage did not invent the political power of women, but advanced it. The means of a community cannot be equivocated with its ends. It may very well be argued that the concept of community is inherently ambiguous and heterogeneous, but this should not prevent us to see the particular use of it in this context. The nature of associations we belong to are not the types of relations available to us.

Understanding Nation

There are many interpretations of patriotism and nationalism. What is important here is the relevance of national partiality to global distributive justice. It must go without saying that any form of unnecessary parochialism or self-interest that narrows the reach of thinking and feeling is not fitting to the projects of philosophy, ethics, justice, or the like, because it robs one
of the necessary steps to accomplish such a project. Loyalty is typically understood as a virtue of “perseverance in an association” one “has become intrinsically committed as a matter of his or her identity” (Kleinig, 2017). But loyalty is irrelevant to justice, since fair and independent distribution of the sort considered here is committed to impartial resolution of partial interests, addresses antagonism, and possesses independence from other forms of authority.

Nation, and not patria, is the ground of any political or social project, since it involves the forms of political resources needed. Our identity, too, is dependent on our participation in social life. We find, make, and negotiate networks of belonging in our social activity. But I want to highlight the role of nation as a body of competencies, historical, social projects and activities more than anything. Nation, as a cluster concept, may be any ensemble capable of embodying the plural networks of social exchange capable of acting within and without institutions. It is not simply reducible to any one community, race, or creed. Oriented around vertices of common history, language, character, practice, and sensitivities, among others, nations are loose collectives underlying social projects and are particularly effective through the apparatus of the state. Walzer also considers what is exceptional about role of the nation, as the junction where “[l]anguage, history, and culture come together (come more closely together here than anywhere else) to produce a collective consciousness” (Walzer, 1983, p. 28). Even though he dismisses the conception in terms if a “fixed and permanent mental set” as “obviously a myth,” he, nonetheless, accepts it as “a fact of life” that “the members of a historical community” share amongst themselves some set of “sensibilities and intuitions” (Walzer, 1983). But, this assumption is objectionable in the face of the moral cognition study considered which locates individual differences chiefly in interpersonal orientation, and only then in relation to structural
tendencies of organizations. As mentioned before, the psychological and interpersonal tendencies of individuals are believed to be at work, rather than their national or communal membership.

Two concerns are germane about the role of nations. Firstly, the epistemic relevance of national action is undeniable. The knowledge and sensitivities of a nation give it significant competence to address certain issues. For instance, it is far easier to address concerns presented in the first language of participants than it is in the second. Discourse tends to be carried in a particular language, history, and culture. More broadly, those invested in some outcome are best suited to manage its process.

Secondly, the ontological reality of social life and collective action requires a thorough and dedicated investment in our immediate social relations. Availability of means and often proximity itself shape the range of possibility for public projects. Ensuring safe drinking water in communities is often far easier as a collective project than it is otherwise. Such collective efforts are always more effective when enacted through national institutions. This is not to say that we cannot commit to far reaching global projects, but that, more often than not, the realities of organization and action are most effectively worked outwards. So, many of us may invest in charities, non-governmental organizations, and other globally impactful projects, but collectively and as nations we have immediate responsibilities. Non-national projects only extend the benefits of governmental and intergovernmental spheres accomplished nationally. Ultimately, the magnitude of our national partiality is not found in loyalty, but in the nature of our contingency. International cooperation demands a kind of cosmopolitanism because the “destinies of nations are closely intertwined with respect to basic goods and survival itself” (Nussbaum, 2009). The reality of social engagement always comes to this: I find the locus of action always first here in me and there in us. This is not a consequence of value commitments,
but a simple fact about one’s reach. And this is exactly the extent to which any such principle as reciprocity or loyalty may be relevant to issues of global justice; the extent of individual participations and collective engagements. The most effective and extensive projects of global justice are always those we already find ourselves within: Our national projects of distributive justice.

Conclusions

In this paper I have addressed some of the key issues in the debate over global distributive justice. I have presented the significance and compatibility of a certain kind of national partiality to this project. Michael Walzer proposes the “only plausible alternative” to the kind of “political community” he envisions to be “humanity itself, the society of nations, the entire globe” (Walzer, 1983, p. 29). I have argued otherwise. Walzer also sees the global scope of the cosmopolitan project as wrongheaded for demanding us to “imagine what does not yet exist: a community that included all men and women everywhere” (Walzer, 1983). I propose, instead, that the power of philosophical thinking is often enough the resolution of such imaginary impasse.

The biggest disagreement between the cosmopolitans and their critics rests on their approach to justice. As I have argued, the understanding of justice as a unique form of public project must be a substantial element of any such undertaking in global affairs. Global justice entails pursuing a comprehensive plan of action that is faithful to ongoing struggles for national distribution. It is in this vein that projects reducing the uniquely political character of justice to any other realm, whether it be morality such as in the utilitarian approach, the community in the communitarian approach as championed by Alasdair MacIntyre, or sovereignty in the statist approach, are to be refuted for their deficiency and shortcomings. Moreover, resisting the
bifurcation between one’s community and humanity at large guarantees a standard of
benevolence and amity amongst people internationally. Nations are still the most powerful and
capable vehicles globally. Tolerance and affirmation of the auspicious distributive projects of
nations is indispensable to accomplishing global justice. A world of peace and justice is a world
of achievements open to those who seek it.
References


