# MORAL IMAGINATION, EPISTEMIC ALLYSHIP, AND FASHIONING *SHARED* MORAL WORLDS: REIMAGINING THE ROYCEAN *ABSOLUTE* FOR A PRAGMATIST MORAL EPISTEMOLOGY FROM THE MARGINS

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ABSTRACT: Women, Third World subjects, and other marginalized groups often have a difficult time fitting in with classical conceptions of the moral subject who is defined through mastery over oneself. The paper begins with the crucial feminist insight to attend to vulnerability, and centers the voices of the absent and dispossessed moral subjects to develop resources for a pragmatist moral epistemology from the margins. But a critical question remains: Is there a possibility of sharing in a common moral world, if moral agency looks radically different from the perspective of a morally privileged subject in comparison to a dispossessed subject? Moral imagination, I argue, can become a key resource for bridging epistemic divides and theorizing the possibility of *shared* moral worlds. While the work of John Dewey remains the primary reference point on moral imagination in pragmatism, this paper theorizes the nexus between moral imagination, dispossession, and collective resistance by engaging with Josiah Royce's idealistic pragmatism. To mitigate any distributive injustices in the burdens of moral dispossession, we need to simultaneously build a critical epistemology for the morally privileged subject alongside a moral epistemology of dispossession. The paper takes this dual-pronged approach for developing a collective moral epistemology of resistance, where the marginalized and the typically self-assured moral subject can hope to build epistemic allyship without which the project of moral recognition would remain incomplete. I engage with two texts by Royce, namely, the *World and the Individual* (Second Series): *Nature, Man, and the Moral Order*, which was originally published in 1901 and part one of *The Problem of Christianity*, which was originally published in 1913. The conception of the *Absolute* in the *World and the Individual* and the *universal community* in *The Problem of Christianity* are interpreted as the relational normative ground on which the dispossessed and the privileged may hope to stand together to expand their moral imagination and connect with moral and epistemic worlds beyond their own. This relational ground must be actively founded through imagination, which involves among other things, developing specific kinds of affective rationality. In this context, I interpret the Roycean notion of atonement as a form of affective rationality. I argue for atonement as a normative concept, which holds the capacity to bring into contention the epistemic and moral worlds of individually arrogant moral subjects as well as arrogant moral communities. Absolute pragmatism can help us to develop a future-oriented and anticipatory conception of imagination for fashioning shared moral worlds, rather than relying on a past-oriented moral foundationalism to resolve moral disagreements. Not only does my analysis contribute toward a pragmatist moral epistemology from the margins, but it also speaks to the aesthetic dimensions of our moral lives, which are central to pragmatist ethics. Finally, the paper contributes toward a novel interpretation of Josiah Royce's philosophy from the framework of dispossession and develops on its potential to contribute to moral epistemology and the theme of recognition.

**Keywords:** Moral epistemology, moral imagination, pragmatism, feminism, Josiah Royce, Absolute, universal community, atonement, moral dispossession, epistemology of privilege, epistemic allyship, recognition

Women, Third World subjects and other marginalized groups often have a difficult time fitting in with classical conceptions of the moral subject who is defined through mastery over oneself. Dominant versions of classical Western moral theory have not centralized relationality and vulnerability as sites of moral gravity, a point to which feminist moral theory draws our attention. The paper begins with the crucial feminist insight to attend to vulnerability, and centers the voices of the absent and silenced subjects in drawing up a moral epistemology. The point to note, however, is that a formal extension of dignity does little to build epistemic confidence in those who, at best, remain at the periphery of moral theory. The framework of *moral dispossession*, articulated as an aspect of feminist pragmatism (Banerjee, 2025), can be effective in capturing the nature of moral harm inflicted on the marginalized moral subject. "Moral dispossession is not a feeling, but a material-symbolic condition. It is an outcome of both structural inequalities and moral mis-recognition." (Banerjee, 2025, 33) The current paper attempts to intervene at the level of moral epistemology for mitigating moral dispossession. My aim is to develop resources for a pragmatist moral epistemology from the margins.

A critical question remains: Is there a possibility of sharing in a common moral world, if moral agency looks radically different from the perspective of a morally assured subject in comparison to a dispossessed subject? Moral imagination, I argue, can become a key resource for bridging epistemic divides and theorizing the possi-

bility of *shared* moral worlds. Pragmatism provides rich insights into both the experiential and aesthetic dimensions of morality through the emphasis on moral imagination. This paper theorizes the nexus between moral imagination, dispossession, and collective resistance for a pragmatist moral epistemology from the margins. As we center the voices of those that are on the margins of subjecthood in developing a moral epistemology, immediately concepts such as vulnerability, oppression, privilege, and injustice are situated at the heart of moral theory rather than being imported as afterthoughts or being viewed as post-facto problems for empirical morality but not something that moral theory must necessarily contend with. While the work of John Dewey remains the primary reference point on moral imagination within pragmatism, this paper develops resources for a pragmatist theory of moral imagination by engaging with an unlikely source, namely, Josiah Royce's idealistic pragmatism. Royce did not offer a conception of moral imagination, neither did he develop a well-articulated theory of moral aesthetics like Dewey. However, his philosophical perspective on self, community and the moral life can provide substantial insight for a pragmatist theory of moral imagination. The paper begins from these insights, but goes on to develop on their potential for building a moral epistemology from the margins.

A viable framework for moral epistemology from the margins should not only be capable of addressing the dispossessed moral subject, but also the privileged subject, since undoing moral dispossession ultimately requires undoing privilege. In fact, moral mis-recognition cannot be undone without a framework for recognition of all parties. More importantly, undoing dispossession should not become the sole or disproportionate burden of the marginalized.[1] To mitigate any distributive injustices in the burdens of moral dispossession, we need to simultaneously build a critical epistemology for the morally privileged subject alongside a moral epistemology of dispossession. A critical epistemology of privilege must offer resources for actively undoing privilege so that ultimately an arrogant conception of moral subjectivity comes undone. The paper takes this dual-pronged approach for developing a collective moral epistemology of resistance, where the marginalized and the typically self-assured moral subject can hope to build epistemic allyship without which the project of moral recognition would remain incomplete.

We must be attentive to the fact that due to differences in epistemic strategies, possibilities and varied as well as often incommensurable moral needs of the parties involved on the opposite sides of privilege, the two epistemologies have very different normative tasks. While the primary task of a moral epistemology of undoing dispossession is to secure the grounds of moral assuredness and epistemic confidence for the marginalized moral subject, the primary task of a critical epistemology of privilege is to preserve moral confidence while undoing epistemic arrogance. After all, not only are marginalized groups placed at a "cognitive disadvantage" (Fricker, 2006, 103), but as we develop the discussion of marginalization from a moral perspective, we also see that they are put at a disadvantage in terms of moral entitlement. Therefore, epistemic recognition requires the privileged not only to come to a recognition of the cognitive advantage they hold, but also requires them to epistemically relate to their own ignorance in order actively to undo it. The latter is especially important because the nature of privilege is to remain invisible, as scholars such as Peggy McIntosh (1989) and Alison Bailey (1998) point out. Similarly, moral recognition demands that the privileged come to an acknowledgement of the kind of advantage they hold in their claim to moral entitlement compared to morally dispossessed subjects (Banerjee, 2025, 41). Thus, working toward a non-ignorant viewpoint and undoing moral arrogance is not merely an epistemological project, but

[1] See Kristie Dotson (2012) and Amrita Banerjee (2018) for a philosophical analysis of various problems that arise when disproportionate epistemic and moral burdens related to difference are placed on marginalized or non-hegemonic groups.

it is also an ethical task at the same time. I argue that a collective moral epistemology of resistance, as described above, must in turn, center the idea of moral imagination as its critical component. A pragmatist perspective can make a valuable contribution in this regard through articulating a critical account of moral imagination.

The paper develops resources for a critical account of moral imagination, which can contribute toward resisting moral dispossession and undoing privilege. More specifically, I reflect on the nexus between moral imagination, dispossession, and undoing epistemic arrogance, thus taking us a step forward to articulating a collective epistemology of resistance. I engage with two texts by Royce, namely, the *World and the Individual* (Second Series): *Nature, Man, and the Moral Order*, which was originally published in 1901 and part one of *The Problem of Christianity*, which was originally published in 1913. I develop the idea of *relational vulnerability* by centering the fragility of the moral will to subvert, what I term, as an *arrogant conception* of the moral subject. Relational vulnerability challenges the idea of a moral subject as a self-validating and self-authenticating source of moral claims. The conception of the *Absolute* in the *World and the Individual* and the *universal community* in *The Problem of Christianity* are interpreted as relational normative ground on which the dispossessed and the privileged may hope to stand together to expand their moral imagination and connect with moral and epistemic worlds beyond their own. This relational ground must be actively founded through imagination, which involves, among other things, developing specific kinds of affective rationality.

Section one aims to provide an interpretation of the Absolute through the lens of a moral epistemology of dispossession. The focus is on Royce's *The World and the Individual* (Second Series) to conceptualize the will, its temporal structure, and the relation between willing and truth. I find this text fascinating for taking on a discussion of plurality while also working out a notion of unity through the idea of the Absolute. I argue that not only is the moral will relational, but we must understand its fragility and explore the ethical implications of this fragility. More specifically, I argue that in light of the fragile nature of the moral will, which in turn, exposes our relational vulnerability, we arrive at a normative counter-point to a notion of an epistemically arrogant moral subject. Relational vulnerability also opens up a space for situating concerns about dispossession and mis-recognition at the heart of moral theory. Moreover, it provides us with a way to conceive of epistemic agency in the face of moral dispossession. Section two shifts the focus toward a critical epistemology of privilege and provides an interpretation of universal community through this lens. By engaging with part one of *The Problem of Christianity*, I go on to consider the self's relation to their own community, and ultimately to the notion of a universal community. Analysis in this section builds on the epistemic underpinnings of the will's fragility, but does so with a focus on the affective dimensions of moral privilege. In this context, I interpret Royce's notion of atonement as a form of affective rationality. I argue for atonement as a normative concept, which holds the capacity to bring into contention the epistemic and moral worlds of individually arrogant moral subjects as well as arrogant moral communities. Atonement can disrupt uncritical epistemologies of privilege by actively undoing, rather than being merely complicit in one's privilege. This is essential for building a critical epistemology of privilege. Through my combined reading of the two texts, I build toward a perspective on moral imagination that not only captures moral dispossession and its wrongs, but also contributes toward a positive framework for a collective epistemology of resistance, where the oppressed and the privileged can hope to come together in epistemic allyship to undo dispossession and privilege simultaneously. Absolute pragmatism can help us to develop a future-oriented and anticipatory conception of imagination for fashioning shared moral worlds, rather than relying on a past-oriented moral foundationalism to resolve moral disagreements. Not only does my analysis contribute to-

ward a pragmatist moral epistemology from the margins, but it also speaks to the aesthetic dimensions of our moral lives, which are central to pragmatist ethics. Finally, the paper contributes toward a novel interpretation of Josiah Royce's philosophy from the framework of dispossession and develops on its potential to contribute to moral epistemology and the theme of recognition.

**Section One: The Absolute as an Imaginative Ground of Epistemic Confidence for the Morally Dispossessed Subject: The Will's Fragility**

Critiquing Kantian Rationalism on the question of the self, Royce asserts, "The defect of Critical Rationalism lies in the consequences of its essentially abstract and impersonal view of Being. The Self, in this sense, is a law rather than a life. … It is precisely the restoration of individuality to the Self which constitutes the essential deed of our Idealism." (1904, 286) In this section, I discuss how this notion of the individual in *The World and the Individual* (Second Series) problematizes a purely private understanding of moral life and consequently, a self-contained notion of the moral subject. It moves us to a dialogic notion of the moral will, which I term as *an-other will*. The latter signifies the moral will as being fashioned through transactions between the self and the other in the context of interpretation, which is triangulated through the notion of an Absolute within Roycean pragmatism. The analysis of the section also contributes toward subverting any simplistic reading of the Absolute in Royce as signifying a kind of unqualified foundationalism.[2] We need to situate the discussion of the individual will and appreciate the discussion of the underlying temporality of the will within this schematic.

Royce extensively discusses the temporal structure of the will in *The World and the Individual* (Second Series). The double aspects characterizing every experience are change and succession. Change in our experience is understood in terms of succession – we say that there is a change when something has succeeded the preceding experience. Temporal succession, in turn, involves specific relations between the entities in question and has a determinate direction.[3] However, we need to see the succession as a whole to understand its direction. The whole-part relation in our experience of temporality is such that we are aware of the individual entity in sequence (along with the boundaries between entities) and the sequence simultaneously in our experience.[4] Therefore, the entity in the moment gains its identity only by virtue of its connection to and differentiation from relations that exceed it, that is, with reference to something greater and in the context of various mediating relations. Moreover, that which appears whole from one perspective, can appear to be an individual as a part of a larger series from a different perspective. The temporality of the will, in other words, manifests an order, which gestures towards the whole but is also individualized in the moment through desires, interests and so on. The interesting implication of this analysis of the part-whole relation in the underlying structure of temporality is that it opens up a critical space for interpretation in the self's relation to itself.

Royce highlights that we realize the will's ties to that which exceeds individual experience when we evoke the

[2] Randall E. Auxier's anti-foundationalist reading of Royce constitutes a significant development in this context. Auxier (2013) interprets Royce's philosophical method as "hypothetical ontology," where philosophy can be best understood as kind of faith based on postulates that may be exemplified in our actual experiences or are posited to make sense of our empirical observations. How far the analysis in the paper exactly aligns with Auxier's understanding of hypothetical ontology, especially in relation to the respective appraisals of the roles of the epistemic, logical and moral in the scheme of ontology, remains a project for future analysis. However, the current analysis, in spirit, aligns with the conceptual move of problematizing any reading of the Absolute as Real in a transcendent sense in Royce. At this point, I agree with Auxier.

[3] In this context, Royce notes the distinction between time and space relations. In the experience of the succession of time, one event passes onto the next one which means that the first entity becomes a thing of the past as soon as the second one becomes present. In case of space relations however, when we say one entity is next to the other, the relation can also be one of coexistence of the two entities.

[4] On this point, Royce criticizes the Associationists or any view, which holds that we only experience parts and then we synthesize these into wholes. Rather, Royce argues, that we get both parts and the whole in experience.

question of truth. The body of facts that is often appealed to in order to guarantee truth exceeds any one individual. One reason for this is that we usually verify in degrees, which makes verification a progressive process rather than being one isolated moment in time. Second, even if we can verify and answer with a great degree of clarity questions about our present experience, in Royce's words, "… nobody amongst us human beings, as now we are, can verify precisely the whole of what it is that the present moment furnishes to his experience. … the present experience itself, or even the verification of facts of this present experience, has more Being than I am able now to observe." (1904, 19) Again, whatever transcends the data of our present experience, that is, any accredited fact that exceeds individual verification, is capable of indirect demonstration. To quote Royce, "… *our presented experience is indeed our only guide; but it always guides us by pointing beyond itself…. We know of no metaempirical truth except by means of presentations. But our presentations, in our present form of consciousness, get their whole sense from their reference to what, for us, remains metaempirical truth*." (1904, p. 23, italics in original)

The point that is emphasized through all these textual excerpts is that the being of any entity (including the will) is never exhausted in itself. Neither can the will be justified, nor can it be evaluated purely on its own terms and only in relation to the present. In other words, the will must stand outside of the mere present and project into the past, for instance, in order to interpret itself. In so far as the will has this power of interpretive judgement, we must regard the will as *ecstatic* and, almost in an existentialist sense, as standing outside of itself in order to be. Thus, we must conceive of the will not as a simple self-relation, but as being other-oriented and dialogic at the same time. I use the conceptual framing of the will as *an-other* will to highlight the will's relational, fragmented and fragile nature. The idea of an-other will is further reinforced through Royce's discussion of the phenomenology of the moral self. Identity is not merely a self-relation, but is defined in terms of an organic self, which is seen as developing in and through relations. It is only through acts of discrimination, as Royce puts it, which are accentuated by various social motives and models, that we begin to draw more and more rigid borders around the (individual) self. A significant implication of this for the current analysis is: if the will is ontologically and epistemologically related to others, then any illusion about its self-containment is shattered and we must accept vulnerability as a feature of the will itself, and not merely as an externally imposed constraint. Vulnerability, thus conceived, also gives the will, the normative capacity to link with epistemic and moral worlds of others.

The analysis in the *World and the Individual* (Second Series) enables us to center the significance of not only interpretation, but also imagination and, in fact, interpretation as an aspect of moral imagination in Royce's notion of the will, although Royce himself does not frame the matter in these terms. This is because action is always tied to moral agency. Given a certain range of possibilities, an agent must make an epistemic cut in order to act, and for this choice they become responsible. Royce characterizes this as the doctrine of "the ethical self".[5] The cut determines the direction of the series that will be generated and it is always tied to purposes, interests, and so on. Therefore, discrimination as both a logical and epistemic act always carries an interpretation, and the latter becomes an integral aspect of our moral lives. The ultimate context of interpretation, of course, is provided by a third space, that is, the *Absolute* in this text, which is not reducible to a collection of individual wills, but is constituted through them.

While resisting a reading of the Absolute in metaphysical terms, I am interested in its logical and epistemic function. The function of the Absolute in *World and the Individual* appears to be that of an epistemic ideal, that

[5] For a detailed analysis of how the self, conceived as an "ethical self" in Royce allows for a more productive framework for the self to relate to others that are different, see Banerjee (2018).

is, a larger horizon which serves as a reminder of our own finitude, narrowness of vision and fallibility rather than it being an all-encompassing totality, which simply expresses itself through individuals. In other words, I interpret the Absolute as signifying an epistemic excess, that is, one which calls us beyond our present here and now. The Absolute logically signifies a large and dynamic system of inter-weavings, which evolves through the ever new and creative acts of individuals. In Royce's own words, "The true variety is that of various individual Selves, who together constitute, in their unity, the Individual of Individuals, the absolute." (1904, 102) It is individuals who create a world through their acts of discrimination (1904, 103). Any entity is logically defined always through discrimination in relation to larger systems. We can find this implication in Royce's definition of an entity. In Royce's words, "I thus conceive the nature of *a* not as static and as merely given to me, but as a stage in a process that now has an actively appreciated and logically significant direction, – a direction determined by my own purposes, and also by the facts." (1904, 84, italics in original) We can further understand such claims in *The World and the Individual* when we read these alongside Royce's larger framework of idealistic logic. Scott Pratt, in his analysis of Royce's logic, notes that Royce understands propositions and classes as, "… modes of action, and they are mediated by still other actions that divide and connect them." (2007, 142). Writes Pratt, "for Royce, thoughts are plans of action, expectations, and dispositions as much as they are reports of the past or statements of fact." (2007, 142) The implication of this perspective for the current analysis is that since an entity is logically defined always through discrimination in relation to larger systems, and since agency is built into each act of discrimination, the identity of entities (including our moral identities) can never be considered to be static, but ever-shifting in response to changing connections, interests, etc. Viewed this way, there would be no abiding compulsion and, in fact, it would be very difficult to assume a homogenous notion of a moral will or even a unified and totally coherent moral identity through an individual's life. The moral will must be seen as dynamic and subject to pragmatist ideas of both change and growth. We arrive at a non-substantive conception of moral identity, that is, one where the moral will is understood as socially and politically embedded. The will is fashioned through our actions and imagination, which are lived and find expression through our loyalty to various epistemic and moral communities.

The Absolute reminds us of our epistemic finitude and incompleteness, and yet, the meaningfulness of our moral lives, which may not be apparent in the here and the now. The Absolute, thus conceived, undermines any conception of fixed reality, including that of a fixed moral world, which is pre-defined and can simply be accessed through the flashlight of reason or intuition. This makes the Roycean Absolute a far cry from a past-oriented moral foundationalism. The logical and epistemic excess designated by the Absolute can ethically re-orient our attitudes to both knowing and unknowing. By disrupting epistemic certitude and reiterating the dialogic aspects of our epistemic and moral lives, the Absolute holds the potential to serve as an imaginative and an interpretive ground for de-centering any arrogant conception of the moral subject, that is, a subject who believes that they can know the moral imperative in a self-referential or monologic fashion. Participating in a shared moral world is an achievement and, such participation is not a given fact when we take reality to be dynamic and open to transformation. The Absolute as a space of imaginative relationality can aid the moral imagination of what we might strive to become. In this sense, it can serve as a relational normative ground from which outcasts, aliens, refugees and other dispossessed moral subjects may be able to imagine an epistemic home. I use "home" here in the sense of the security of a community of belonging, which is able to bestow epistemic assurance and moral confidence in the here and the now. The Absolute interpreted thus, gives us a way of conceiving of reality (both

our epistemic world and moral reality) not as something that is well-formed or fully-formed, but is a praxis in itself. The praxis highlights the necessity to work our way carefully through our complex epistemic and moral lives with an aim to carving out safer spaces and new realities in the process.

The process of imagination and interpretation made possible by the Absolute can be figuratively read as a form of *cartohistography*, a term emerging in the work of feminist scholar Elba Rosario Sánchez (2003). Sanchez uses this term in the context of writing. Cartohistography designates the process of putting on the map new places; however, it is not simply a matter of discovering, but also creatively building and imagining new places (2003, 27). The epistemic connotation of the Absolute for a moral epistemology from the margins is that it enables us to conceive of the moral ground as a kind of relational and communicative space which is, in fact, the imagination of a new space of sorts. Our epistemic orientation to the Absolute reminds us that our individual and collective moral worlds are open-ended, prone to error and perpetually in need of greater integration. The Absolute serves as a sign against which moral responses between the self and others can be envisioned and interpreted. The Absolute calls us to relational vulnerability by opening us onto ever new possibilities of connection and separation, reconciliation and transgression from the given, of epistemically and morally failing and then picking up again, of enduring and striving. In this way, it assures us of a safe space for potentially articulating an oppositional epistemology, that is, of charting an epistemic and moral cartohistography from the margins of moral subjecthood. It is through embodying a liberatory logic, that the Absolute can serve as an epistemic home or a third space, which is creative, fluid and dynamic. As this kind of epistemic and moral space, the Absolute has great potential to confer epistemic assurance and moral courage to the dispossessed subject. To put it otherwise, the Absolute as an imagined material-symbolic space, can serve as a relational normative ground from where the morally dispossessed can hope to stake a claim to moral subjecthood.

**Section 2: Universal Community as an Imaginative Ground of Epistemic Confidence without Arrogance for the Privileged Moral Subject: Atonement as Affective Rationality**

The triangulation of individual wills through a third reference point (that is, the Absolute) gains a spiritual-religious reading through the ideas of the Universal community and interpretation in *The Problem of Christianity*. Royce argues that Christianity embodies such ideas.[6] Tracing the development of Royce's ideas, Ludwig Nagl writes, "The various communities which mature Royce distinguishes, are, however, nowhere simply a substitute for, let alone are they identical with, the "Absolute" of Royce's earlier theory. They do, however, inherit significant aspects of the Absolute's critical potential, albeit in a weak, post-rationalist form." (2004, 61)[7] Frank M. Oppenheim, S.J., too, while noting that there are changes in Royce's mid-period emphasis on the Absolute and late-period emphasis on Interpreter Spirit, nevertheless observes, "Royce's general terminological change from "Absolute" to "Interpreter-Spirit," while absolutely significant, should not, however, be interpreted absolutely." (2001, xxix)[8] This section develops the critical potential of the idea of universal community from part one of *The Problem of Christianity* and interprets it with respect to a critical epistemology of privilege.[9] The reading from the lens of moral epistemology may, in turn, contribute to-

[6] It must be noted that the reading of Christianity that Royce evolves in the text is not historical, anthropological, but deeply philosophical. If aspects of religion encapsulate life and its problems, then Christianity too "… appears as an art of living, as a counsel for the attainment of the ends of human existence." (Royce, 2001, 65)

[7] For more on how the universal community is different from a transcendental Kingdom of Ends, and how Royce keeps pragmatism at the heart of reading the Universal community, see Nagl 2004.

[8] Oppenheim also discusses the use of the term "Absolute" at various points in *The Problem of Christianity*. (2001, xxix).

[9] Unfortunately, the space of the current paper does not allow for an engagement with the notion of interpretation, as discussed by Royce in part two of *The Problem of Christianity*.

ward establishing some points of continuity between the logical and epistemological functions of the Absolute in *The World and the Individual* and the universal community in part one of *The Problem of Christianity*, without conflating the ontological connotation of the two concepts.

While analyzing the notion of a universal community, Royce writes, "The beloved community embodies … *values* which no human individual, viewed as a detached being, could even remotely approach." (2001, 125, italics in original) While the idea of a universal community gets its psychological basis in the social nature of the human, its ethical value comes from the interests, needs and values of individuals in various communities who have understood the deeper meaning of loyalty. By "loyalty," Royce means "… the thoroughgoing, practical, and loving devotion of a self to an united community." (2001, 101) The universal community is not given as a pre-existing foundation for moral life, it almost becomes an imaginative ground through which both the reflective and affective aspects of our individual moral lives can manifest. From Royce's perspective, a truly lovable community must be actively founded. The union of the individual with the universal community relies on a notion of redemption of humankind and, in this plan, atonement for the sins and guilt of humankind finds a crucial place. As Royce puts it, "Without atonement, no salvation." (2001, 73) In my secular interpretation, I read both salvation and atonement as phenomenological orientations to morally negotiate the part-whole relation between the individual and the universal community, while the individual is firmly rooted in particular communities to which they have pledged their loyalty. Atonement, in particular, will be interpreted as a form of affective rationality or a reason-feeling complex.

Individual communities to which individual selves commit their loyalty become the mediating and embodied ground between the individual and the Absolute (now read as universal community). Loyalty to a community is an intermediate step to salvation, and smaller loyalties ideally lead to a larger or "universal loyalty" (2001, 85) to the universal community of all humankind. Loyalty becomes the basis for a moral life since it allows one to interpret oneself differently, that is, to overcome the excessive and regressive individualism by calling the self-will to look outwards or heightening the an-other will, as discussed in the previous section. However, in *The Problem of Christianity*, we see how the will finds moral assurance within specific communities of belonging. Loyalty moves us rationally and affectively to unite with causes and thereby to communities of belonging. Jacquelyn Ann K. Kegley (2004) provides an insightful reading of the Roycean idea of community as being a product of an interpretive process, and she also highlights the importance of continual self-interpretation in building community. On my part, I emphasize that communities of belonging, in turn, not only play a role in the fashioning of individual moral selves, but are critical sources for moral and epistemic recognition through which the will, at least momentarily, overcomes its fragility so that a confident moral subject can emerge. Withholding moral recognition, therefore, would constitute a grave moral injustice since lack of recognition by the community marginalizes subjects as moral outcasts. Royce does not evoke the theme of recognition in his work, nor does he trace the bearings of the epistemic and moral importance of communities in this way. However, an approach developed from the lens of moral dispossession opens up the possibility of a new interpretation of the Roycean idea of community. The dispossessed moral subject must not only contend with morally arrogant individuals, but also with arrogant moral communities. Therefore, a critical epistemology of privilege as an aspect of the collective moral epistemology of resistance must be dual-layered, insofar as it must provide resources for remedying the epistemic arrogance of both morally arrogant individuals and morally arrogant communities. I interpret atonement in this section as a form of affective rationality, which contributes toward the development of such a crit-

ical epistemology of privilege along both these registers. While the previous section focused on the fragility of the moral will and its ethical potential for developing an epistemology of moral dispossession, this section shifts the lens to moral privilege. In other words, the focus here is on the moral and epistemic agents who *do* find recognition within their communities, that is, those who do not find themselves to be outcasts or at the margins of moral subjecthood. The morally privileged subject is one whose loyalty is rewarded by the community through moral recognition and epistemic assurance, and they find themselves entitled to participate in the envisioning and fashioning of the truly lovable community.[10]

In my secular reading of the Roycean position, I not only add onto the ethical reading of atonement, but centralize it as a concept, which indicates an exercise in moral imagination. Atonement captures relational vulnerability and asks the moral subject to contend with the idea of moral dispossession by calling their attention to their own privilege in the scheme of moral entitlement. Royce embeds his discussion of atonement in the discussion of a traitor in *The Problem of Christianity*. It must be noted that Royce discusses various kinds of traitors in the text, and that not all forms of treachery are considered to be virtuous. A case to the point, is that of the traitor whose act emanates, not to further the cause or the community, but due to a desire for personal gain. The "ideal traitor," (2001, 168), on the contrary, through their act of treachery, pushes the community to atone.[11] The traitorous act is characterized as "sin" in the sense that the act demonstrates a betrayal of the community to which the traitor had pledged loyalty. Kara Barnette (2007) mobilizes Royce's ideal of the traitor and offers the conception of "feminist traitors," to think about feminism's critical role in society.[12] The notion of the ideal traitor, which is relevant to the current analysis and also for Barnette's conception of the feminist traitor, is one whose loyalty is intact in the sense that the person, "… commits a traitorous action for a higher purpose – a desire to improve the community as a whole." (Barnette, 2007, 85) Due to the presence of feminist traitors, argues Barnette, "… the atonement that would take place in a society as a result of their treasons would have to address the specific concerns raised by feminist traitors." (2007, 84) I invoke the concept of the traitor in this paper to reflect on its epistemological dimensions and to explore how this concept may contribute toward both undoing privilege as well as an epistemology of allyship from the point of view of the privileged.

The ideal traitor embodies various quandaries of loyalty. The ideal traitor must first have chosen to be loyal to an ideal and now, by their act, have betrayed the cause, thus unleashing what Royce calls the "hell of the irrevocable." (2001, 168) The latter concept signifies that there is no undoing of the deed once this is done. But the deed is not just the traitor's own, although their own moral universe is no doubt disrupted. The traitorous act constitutes a moment of disruption for the community to whose ideals the traitor has committed their loyalty. Royce interrogates the potential of this moment of "moral tragedy" and whether there is a possibility of reconciliation (2001, 166). He asks, "Can such a tragic reconciliation occur in the case of the traitor?" (2001, 170). The possibility of reconciliation ensues through atonement and the recognition that my deed cannot be undone and neither I, nor the community will be the same in light of it. No wonder, Royce emphasizes moral insight as issuing from realizing the "hell of the irrevocable." Scott Pratt (2025), in turn, draws our attention to how irrevocability

[10] Note that for Royce, communities constitute the backdrop for individuals to interpret their ideas, and only by participating in communities, can one atone and find salvation.

[11] Atonement for any form of treachery, however, requires community since atonement can happen only in the context of a community.

[12] "By providing a model of a traitor whose sins against the community play a large role in advancing the community toward salvation, Royce creates ample room for feminist traitors, who actively betray their communities for the goals of feminism and, thereby, positively transform their communities." (Barnette, 2007, 81).

is absolute in the sense that one could address its consequences or forgive the action, but the action itself cannot be taken back or undone. My reading highlights that the tragic but creative role attributed to the traitor, and the subsequent space this opens up for atonement, foregrounds the fragility of the moral will of even the most arrogant moral subjects.

I interpret atonement as signaling a kind of moral distress in which the epistemic and moral security of the home-ground is disrupted even for the privileged subject, that is, a subject whose community had hitherto conferred both epistemic and moral assurance through recognition. When the privileged subject's deed is no longer congruent with the cause, and consequently with the epistemic and moral standards of the community, this may issue forth in the realization of fragility and precarity. The break in the moral universe calls for an epistemic revaluation of existing norms as well as a moral evaluation of the cause to which one had pledged loyalty. In these ways, atonement is a reflective act. Atonement also has an affective dimension. In being designated a traitor and atoning for the deed, the privileged subject experiences themselves as a curtailed or inhibited subject, which is a marker of moral dispossession. Moreover, despite the fact that the privileged subject cannot share in the lived experience of the dispossessed subject and the latter's conception of reality, atonement provides an imaginative possibility for a new interpretation of the ethical self, which recognizes the significance of fragility, precarity, humility, and the fear of losing the very ground on which one once stood.

Atonement as a form of affective rationality begins to gesture toward a normative epistemology for the morally privileged subject, which can ultimately de-center privilege, and through this, potentially overcome the epistemic vice of arrogance. This is because atonement brings to the fore not just the fragility of the moral will in general, but the fragility of the moral will of the privileged subject in particular, especially in their role of a loyal traitor. As a form of affective rationality, atonement, becomes a form of moral imagination. The ethico-epistemic potential of atonement lies in creating this kind of moral ground, through which one is able to see the moral problems with privilege, and one could begin to epistemically and morally (even if not experientially) relate to those who never found a home and were denied participation in the community. In other words, atonement creates a normative orientation for epistemic confidence without arrogance on the part of a privileged subject. The epistemic insecurity created in the privileged subject, however, is qualitatively different from and cannot be characterized as a kind of "hermeneutical injustice" (Fricker, 2006, 96). Fricker's work points to hermeneutical injustice as a specific kind of epistemic injustice that affects marginalized groups, and she defines it as, "the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to hermeneutical marginalization." (Fricker, 2006, 102) Contrary to this, in the case of the privileged subject under consideration, the normative potential for fragmentation and incommensurability with existing standards operates within a larger epistemology of privilege. In other words, the epistemic perspective and experience of the typically self-assured subject is not obscured or marginalized within the collective epistemology. Consequently, the epistemic insecurity within atonement does not constitute a form of hermeneutical injustice. Nevertheless, atonement marks a moment of disruption within privilege, and gives us an opening to move from moral experience toward a critical epistemology of privilege. This is the move I wish to mark. A critical epistemology of privilege has both reflective and imaginative components, and is one which hopes to create a normative ground without a substantive foundationalism. Traitorous identities and atonement provide a normative beginning point of envisioning such a normative ground. In this way, they speak to epistemic allyship, trust and fostering moral recognition between the privileged and dispossessed moral subject. Atonement provides a way

to move toward a collective epistemology of resistance without assuming either sharedness of moral experience or sharedness of moral beliefs. Part of the reconciliation through atonement from the perspective of the privileged moral subject would be to come to a sense of epistemic confidence by overcoming insecurity but without the past epistemic arrogance. This may constitute a critical first step toward envisioning shared moral worlds where privilege is undone simultaneously with dispossession.

Royce further goes on to state, "The problem of reconciliation… if reconciliation there is to be, - concerns not only the traitor, but the wounded or shattered community." (2001, 175) Since individuals and communities are bound not just agentially, but also epistemically, the act of the traitor constitutes a moment of what we may term as, "epistemic reckoning" for the community. The community is now called to reimagine altogether new ways of assuming its moral burdens and epistemic responsibility. The fragility of the will of not only the individual traitor, but also fragility of the collective epistemology and sense of moral assuredness of the community of privilege to which the traitor belongs is exposed when the assurance of shared epistemic and moral beliefs is shattered. This moment has the capacity to generate a collective moral imagination, a practical wisdom of sorts that disrupts the community no doubt, but may ultimately bring it to rethink its own assumed epistemic world. The epistemic reckoning also creates a space for a moral reckoning and accountability as the assurance of the existing collective moral standards is undermined, and the fragility of the collective moral will lies exposed. The disruptive moment also provides a space for communities to begin to imagine themselves differently and to critically engage with their privilege. Managing epistemic ignorance demands specific kinds of ethical orientations, and atonement seems to provide a normative basis within the collective epistemology for a critical moral imagination to emerge since, for now, the community has to contend with a deed not done before. In this sense, atonement can be interpreted as an assertion of epistemic vulnerability and moral fragility since the traitorous deed creates an impasse and brings into contention existing standards of knowing and doing. The process of reconciliation, in turn, intervenes into privileged ignorance by forcing the community to register that which was not heard, not spoken, and not done before. While atonement can be read as an assertion of epistemic vulnerability and moral fragility, reconciliation yields a dynamic conception of reality and moral community since there is no way of simply going back to what was before.

Reconciliation requires interpretation, and the idea of the universal community creates the condition of possibility for such an interpretation to emerge. The universal community, interpreted as a *community-yet-to-be-imagined*, normatively provides epistemic assurance to individual communities of loyalty. It is able to provide assurance by grounding a vision of a moral community, which is inclusive and can accommodate unanticipated frames of knowing and doing. Healing of a community can only begin when a collective moral imagination develops, which understands that critically engaging with the moral burdens of privilege is central to undoing the privilege of morally arrogant subjects and ultimately for striving for the moral recognition of all parties. The universal community, in short, enables a moral epistemology, which can assure epistemic and moral confidence to particular communities, while undoing moral arrogance on the part of these individual communities of loyalty. The universal community, therefore, serves as an imaginative ground from which epistemic and moral incompleteness, fragmentation, ambiguity and moral injury to the community can be dealt with so that healing can begin for moral communities in a more inclusive mode.

**Epilogue**

In working across differences, moral agreement is often not possible; neither is this necessary. In fact, Charles

Mills (1997), through his conception of an "epistemology of ignorance" highlights how the privileged and the oppressed do not possess the same epistemology of the world, nor a shared sense of reality. In this scenario, a conception of moral imagination that presupposes the idea of a shared reality including shared moral beliefs, is bound to fail. Such a conception of moral imagination can be regressive and would end up appropriating moral worlds without understanding the particularity of moral claims or the specificity of moral situations. In contrast, the important project is to develop the epistemic capacity to inhabit, what I call, *shared* moral worlds, without presupposing a pre-given foundation for such worlds. To develop the idea of a shared moral world, however, we need a moral ontology that takes reality to be dynamic. Through my interpretation of the concepts of the Absolute and universal community in Royce, I have argued that these logically and epistemologically provide a holistic, integrative and yet non-foundationalist moral ground.

We also need a moral epistemology that takes our experience of reality as incomplete and fallible. In fact, working together across difference not only requires undoing of oppression but of privilege as well, as much of philosophy from the margins would tell us. This means that recognition calls not only for the marginalized to make their standpoints visible, but it also simultaneously demands a de-centering of privileged ignorance.

The imagined epistemic vantage-point of the Absolute in the *World and the Individual* and the universal community in *The Problem of Christianity* have been interpreted as providing a ground for an anticipatory form of moral imagination. This perspective sets us up in a better position to not only capture moral dispossession, but ultimately to build epistemic bridges across moral worlds, where we work together to undo both moral dispossession and privilege. While the imagination of a universal community becomes a symbolic home for dispossessed moral subjects, the arrogant moral subjects (both individuals and communities with moral privilege) are, in turn, reminded of their fragility, precarity and relationality to goals, values and interests that exceed them. By playing this role, moral imagination hopes to invigorate an epistemic capacity to inhabit shared moral worlds. The conception of a shared moral world proposed in the paper defines it as a meeting-place, which is based in affective rationality. It is an epistemic foundation that must be created through a future-oriented and anticipatory form of imagination, which involves affective labor rather than taking recourse to a predefined metaphysical ground on which one already stands. In other words, we no longer rely on a past-oriented moral foundationalism. Atonement as a reason-feeling complex gives us a glimpse intoone of the sites of such affective labor although, by no means, is this exhaustive of the labour. Through my interpretation, I have argued that the sharedness that is made possible by the logical and epistemological function of the Absolute in *World and the Individual* and universal community in *The Problem of Christianity* need not assume a shared moral reality; neither does it demand commensurability of lived experience between the dispossessed and the privileged moral subject. Rather, the aim is to move toward sharedness through an anticipatory and critical conception of moral imagination, which hopes to achieve epistemic assurance and moral security without arrogance.

Undoing privilege also demands a different kind of moral orientation that seeks to intervene creatively and sometimes even disruptively into a community's existing moral world in order to issue a call to action, undo epistemic arrogance and move one step closer to reconciling or at least reaching out to those who have been excluded from the moral universe of the community. For this, we need to put into contention both an abstract notion of absolute moral values on the one hand, and a reductionist communitarian understanding of values on the other. Moral community cannot be pre-empted, neither can it be discovered uncritically through a static system of shared moral beliefs. Rather, the sense of sharedness

of moral worlds developed in this paper does not assume a shared reality or even shared moral beliefs as starting points for ally-ship. The analysis gestures toward the significance of various epistemic processes and the need to mobilize forms of affective rationality, all of which are embedded in a dynamic understanding of moral community. Atonement, as an epistemic-ethical tool, is one among such reflective and affective practices, which can contribute to the imagination of shared moral worlds despite lack of commensurability in moral experience. In short, one hopes to move towards epistemic assurance without moral arrogance. The perspective of the Absolute and the universal community create a space for a non-foundational, but yet steady anchor for moral imagination, both for individual selves and communities alike. Such a conception of moral imagination hopes to remain critical and dynamic so that we can collectively work toward the moral recognition of all and not just a few privileged moral subjects.

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