

Epistemic Authority

What Ontology Leaves Unresolved

Project: [Return to Consciousness](#)

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Authorship Note: Co-authored with AI as a disciplined thinking instrument—not a replacement for judgment. Prioritizes epistemic integrity and truth-seeking as a moral responsibility.

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Abstract

Even when consciousness-first metaphysics is accepted at the level of ontology, physicalist epistemic privilege does not automatically dissolve. This essay examines the structural problem that emerges: **physicalist assumptions about what counts as legitimate knowledge can survive the very inversion that was supposed to displace them.** Earlier work in this project exposes physicalism as an unjustified default at the level of *ontology*. But a subtler asymmetry persists at the level of *epistemology* — in which forms of consciousness states are permitted to “know,” where first-person access sits in the hierarchy of explanation, and whether contemplative evidence carries weight or merely illustration. The residue is specific: meta-consciousness is still assumed to require neural substrate; third-person description retains authority over first-person experience even when the subject matter *is* experience. This essay diagnoses that persistence and argues that ontological inversion without epistemic revision is incomplete.

Keywords: epistemic authority · ontological inversion · physicalist epistemology · first-person knowledge · contemplative evidence · meta-consciousness · idealism · epistemic residue

I. The Problem That Has Now Become Visible

The Success of Ontological Critique

The project’s methodological essays have established two key claims:

1. **Metaphysical neutrality is impossible.** Every research program presupposes ontological commitments. The appearance of neutrality typically conceals unexamined physicalism. (*Myth of Metaphysical Neutrality*)
2. **Methodological restraint is applied asymmetrically.** Speculative commitments grounded in third-person structure (many-worlds, modal realism, mathematical Platonism) are routinely tolerated, while consciousness-first frameworks face disproportionate resistance under identical evidential conditions. (*Asymmetric Methodological Restraint*)

Together, these arguments challenge **physicalism as an ontological default**. They demonstrate that excluding consciousness-first ontology cannot be defended as mere caution—it requires positive justification that is rarely provided.

The Deeper Issue

However, a further problem now becomes visible:

Ontological revision alone does not automatically dissolve inherited epistemic constraints.

Even after consciousness is granted ontological primacy—accepted as the fundamental nature of reality rather than a product of physical processes—questions of **epistemic authority** remain unsettled:

- What counts as legitimate knowledge about consciousness?
- What forms of awareness are permitted to “know”?
- Where does first-person access sit in the hierarchy of explanation?
- Is meta-consciousness (reflexive self-awareness) brain-dependent or ontologically prior?

These are not peripheral questions. They determine whether consciousness-first ontology genuinely displaces physicalism, or whether physicalist assumptions quietly persist at a deeper level—shaping what evidence is admissible, which methods are legitimate, and whose testimony carries weight.

The Shape of the Persistence

Physicalist epistemic privilege often reappears in subtle forms, even within consciousness-first frameworks:

- **Meta-consciousness as complexity-dependent:** Treating reflexive self-awareness as a late achievement requiring representational sophistication—implicitly locating it in brains.
- **Third-person priority:** Granting scientific description authority over first-person report, even when the subject matter is experience itself.
- **Biological instantiation assumption:** Assuming that awareness capable of knowing must be embodied in biological systems with sufficient neural complexity.
- **Contemplative evidence as illustrative:** Treating phenomenological and contemplative reports as colorful illustration rather than epistemically weight-bearing data.

None of these positions are *required* by idealism. But without explicit examination, they are easily reintroduced by default—carried over from the physicalist framework that consciousness-first ontology ostensibly replaces.

II. AMR’s Diagnosis—And Its Logical Completion

What AMR Established

Asymmetric Methodological Restraint exposes a hidden double standard: speculative physics enjoys latitude that consciousness research is denied. The essay reframes debates as disputes about **epistemic risk allocation** rather than evidence alone.

The core insight is precise: **restraint is selective, not general**. Those who invoke “methodological caution” against consciousness-first frameworks rarely apply equivalent scrutiny to their own speculative commitments.

The Internal Application

AMR applies this diagnosis *externally*—against physicalist gatekeeping of consciousness research.

What is now needed is to apply the same diagnostic *internally*: at the level of epistemic assumptions that survive ontological inversion.

The parallel is exact:

Level	External (AMR)	Internal (This Essay)
Target	Physicalism as ontological default	Physicalist epistemology as residual default
Asymmetry	Speculation tolerated in physics, blocked in consciousness	Third-person methods privileged over first-person access
Hidden assumption	Matter is fundamental	Knowing requires material complexity
Effect	Consciousness-first ontology excluded	Consciousness-first epistemology constrained

If AMR exposes hidden physicalism at the level of **permission to theorize**, this essay exposes hidden physicalism at the level of **permission to know**.

III. Five Questions That Require Explicit Treatment

The following questions are already implicitly active across the project. Making them explicit stabilizes the conceptual architecture.

1. Subjectivity vs. Meta-Consciousness

The question: Is subjectivity identical with reflexive self-awareness, or can experience exist without conceptual self-reference?

Why it matters: If subjectivity requires meta-cognition, and meta-cognition requires biological complexity, then consciousness-first ontology becomes paradoxical: the ground of all being would depend on its own products.

The clarification: Analytic idealism distinguishes between: - **Phenomenal consciousness:** The presence of experience, qualitative “what-it-is-like-ness” - **Meta-consciousness:** Reflexive awareness of experience, the capacity to know that one is experiencing

These are not identical. Experience can occur without being an object of reflective attention. The conflation of subjectivity with meta-cognition imports a physicalist assumption: that awareness must be *about* something (intentional, representational) to count as real.

Under idealism, phenomenal consciousness is ontologically primitive. Meta-consciousness is a *mode* of consciousness, not its precondition. Universal consciousness need not be “aware of itself” in the way a human subject is aware of itself—but this does not make it non-experiential.

2. Existence Prior to Brains

The question: How can a world exist before or without brains if consciousness is fundamental—and what kind of consciousness does that imply?

Why it matters: This is the standard objection to idealism: “If consciousness requires brains, how did the universe exist before brains evolved?”

The clarification: The objection assumes what it needs to prove—that consciousness requires brains. Under idealism, brains are *within* consciousness, not its generators. The universe “before” biological life is not a universe without experience; it is experience without the particular dissociative structures that biological organisms instantiate.

The deeper issue is whether consciousness must be *meta-conscious* to exist. If we assume it must, then pre-biological existence becomes paradoxical. But this assumption is not required by idealism—it is a residue of the physicalist intuition that awareness without self-awareness is somehow incomplete or unreal.

Grego (2025) identifies the tension precisely: Kastrup’s conclusion that universal consciousness is probably not meta-conscious relies on scientific models—biological evolution in spacetime—that his own framework treats as *representations*, not fundamental reality. Under analytic idealism, spacetime is the extrinsic appearance of mental processes; evolutionary development is what certain dissociative dynamics *look like* from a dissociated vantage point. Using appearance to characterize what lies beneath it inverts the framework’s own explanatory direction. If the framework is taken seriously on its own terms, the question of whether universal consciousness is meta-conscious must be settled by methods that access consciousness directly—not by models built to abstract consciousness away. This essay, following Grego and the project’s core framework (*RTC*), treats the coherence of a meta-conscious universal consciousness as an open question that the framework permits rather than forecloses.

3. Epistemic Authority

The question: Why are third-person models often granted authority over first-person access, even in consciousness-first frameworks?

Why it matters: If consciousness is fundamental, then first-person access to consciousness is direct acquaintance with the subject matter itself.

The clarification: Consider an analogy. If I report that I am in pain, a neuroscientist can describe the neural correlates of my pain state. But the neuroscientist’s description does not have *authority over* my experience of pain. The third-person description and the first-person experience are different epistemic modes with different objects.

The deeper issue is that these are not competing claims about the same thing—they are different *evidential modalities* suited to different aspects of reality. As *AMR* argues, instrument-based observation accesses the extrinsic appearance of phenomena: what processes look like from outside, measured and mathematized. Phenomenological report accesses the intrinsic character of experience: what it is *like*, from the inside, for the subject undergoing it. Demanding

that phenomenological evidence meet instrument-based standards—reproducible on command, readable by equipment, formalizable in equations—is not methodological rigor. It is the application of one evidential modality’s criteria to a domain where they do not apply, while treating the mismatch as evidence of the domain’s unreliability rather than the criteria’s inapplicability.

Under physicalism, the hierarchy favoring instrument-based evidence is justified: the neural description is “really” what’s happening, and the subjective report is merely how it “seems.” Under idealism, this hierarchy inverts. The experience is ontologically primary; the neural description is an abstraction from experience. Third-person methods retain their value for what they are designed to access—the extrinsic, structural appearance of mental processes. But they do not have authority over first-person access when the subject matter is the intrinsic character of experience itself.

This does not mean first-person reports are infallible or that third-person methods are useless. Third-person methods genuinely correct first-person reports about *processing mechanisms*—change blindness, confabulation in split-brain patients, blindsight all reveal that subjects can be wrong about *how their perceptual systems operate*. But these are corrections about extrinsic processing, not about the intrinsic character of experience. A blindsight patient is wrong about whether visual information reached their cortex; they are not wrong about what their experience was like. The evidential modality distinction holds: each modality is authoritative within its proper domain. The argument is not that first-person reports are immune to correction, but that the *default authority* should not automatically favor third-person description when the subject matter is experience itself. The two modalities are complementary, not hierarchical.

4. The Scope of Meta-Consciousness

The question: Is it coherent to restrict meta-consciousness to dissociated biological systems, or does this restriction covertly rely on physicalist intuitions?

Why it matters: If meta-consciousness can only arise in brains, then even under idealism, the universe’s capacity to know itself depends on biological evolution. This makes consciousness-first ontology oddly incomplete: consciousness grounds everything but cannot know itself without material assistance.

The clarification: The restriction often goes unexamined because it *feels* obvious—of course self-awareness requires a self, and selves require brains. But this obviousness is a product of physicalist conditioning, not logical necessity.

Under idealism: - Universal consciousness is not “blind” or “unconscious” merely because it lacks human-style self-reflection. - Meta-consciousness might be an intrinsic feature of consciousness as such, not an emergent property of complex information processing. - The appearance that self-awareness requires brains might reflect the limitations of dissociated perspective, not ontological truth.

Restricting meta-consciousness to biological systems imports physicalist epistemology into consciousness-first ontology. It grants that consciousness is fundamental while denying it the capacity to know itself—a position that is coherent but requires explicit defense rather than tacit assumption.

5. Methodological Consistency

The question: If phenomenological and contemplative evidence is admitted at all, on what principled basis is it limited?

Why it matters: The project draws on contemplative traditions as evidence of cross-cultural convergence. But this evidence is often treated as *illustrative* rather than *probative*—as pointing toward something that must be validated by other means.

The clarification: This hierarchy reflects AMR’s target asymmetry at the epistemic level. Why should contemplative reports—gathered through millennia of systematic investigation by practitioners who devoted their lives to the inquiry—carry less evidential weight than fMRI studies with $n=30$ undergraduates?

The answer typically appeals to “objectivity”: scientific methods are replicable and verifiable, while contemplative reports are “merely subjective.” But this answer presupposes that objectivity (understood as third-person accessibility) is the gold standard for knowledge about consciousness.

Under idealism, that presupposition is questionable. If consciousness is fundamental, then methods specifically designed to investigate consciousness from within might have *epistemic advantages* that external methods lack—not despite being first-person but *because* they are.

This does not mean contemplative testimony is automatically correct. It means the methodological hierarchy should be examined rather than assumed.

IV. The Structure of Epistemic Residue

Why do physicalist epistemic assumptions persist after ontological inversion? Several mechanisms contribute:

Conceptual Carryover

We learn to think in physicalist categories before encountering alternatives. The categories feel like common sense rather than theoretical commitments. Switching ontology does not automatically switch the conceptual vocabulary through which we interpret experience.

Institutional Embedding

Academic disciplines, funding structures, publication norms, and professional incentives all presuppose physicalist epistemology. Even researchers sympathetic to idealism operate within institutions that treat third-person methods as default legitimate and first-person methods as requiring special justification.

Intuition Pumps

The thought experiments that make physicalist epistemology feel obvious—zombies, inverted qualia, the hard problem itself—all presuppose the framework they are used to establish. They feel compelling because they are designed within physicalist assumptions.

Evidentiary Norms

What counts as “evidence” is not ontologically neutral. The criteria for admissible evidence (replicability, quantifiability, third-person accessibility) were developed for investigating matter, not consciousness. Importing these criteria into consciousness research biases conclusions toward physicalist-compatible results.

The Authority of Science

Science’s extraordinary practical success generates a halo effect. Methods that work for engineering bridges are assumed to work for investigating experience. But consciousness research is not bridge engineering, and the success of one does not validate the other.

V. What Changes Under Epistemic Revision

If physicalist epistemic assumptions are explicitly examined and displaced, several shifts follow:

First-Person Access Gains Standing

Direct acquaintance with experience becomes a legitimate epistemic mode, not merely raw material for third-person processing. Reports from contemplative practitioners carry evidential weight proportional to their systematic rigor, not zero weight by default.

Meta-Consciousness Is Reexamined

The assumption that self-awareness requires biological complexity is questioned rather than taken for granted. The possibility that universal consciousness is intrinsically meta-conscious becomes available for investigation.

Methodological Pluralism

Third-person and first-person methods are treated as complementary rather than hierarchical. The choice between them depends on the question asked, not on a priori assumptions about which yields “real” knowledge.

Convergence Evidence Gains Weight

The cross-cultural convergence of contemplative traditions becomes genuinely diagnostic—evidence that certain structures recur wherever consciousness is investigated seriously—rather than merely illustrative of positions that must be validated externally.

The Hard Problem Transforms

The “hard problem” of consciousness presupposes that consciousness must be explained in terms of something else (matter, function, information). Under consciousness-first epistemology, the hard problem inverts: the challenge is explaining why matter *appears* so different from experience, not why experience emerges from matter.

VI. Clarifications

The claim throughout is about *default authority*, not absolute reliability. First-person reports can be mistaken; third-person methods generate genuine knowledge. The argument is that neither should automatically trump the other when the subject matter is consciousness itself.

Similarly, contemplative traditions deserve evidential weight for their systematic phenomenological investigations—this does not entail that their metaphysical conclusions are correct, only that trained observation of consciousness constitutes evidence.

The Adjudication Question

A natural objection arises: if first-person evidence gains standing, how do we adjudicate disagreements? When contemplatives across traditions report different things—Buddhist *anatta* versus Advaita *Atman*, for instance—what arbitrates?

The objection is legitimate, but it is not unique to first-person inquiry. Third-person methods face the same structural problem: competing fMRI studies, replication crises, contradictory neural models of consciousness. What third-person inquiry has developed is not a problem-free arbiter but *institutional mechanisms for managing disagreement*—peer review, adversarial replication, meta-analysis. The question is whether first-person inquiry can develop analogous mechanisms, not whether the problem is unique to it.

It can. Several criteria are already operative in mature contemplative traditions:

- **Cross-tradition convergence under doctrinal independence.** When traditions with no historical contact—Buddhist, Advaitic, Sufi, Christian contemplative, indigenous—converge on specific phenomenological features (dissolution of subject-object boundary, intrinsic luminosity of awareness, compassion as a structural feature of de-dissociated consciousness), this convergence is not explained by shared doctrine. It functions as a first-person analogue of independent replication.
- **Contradiction of prior belief.** Reports that surprise or contradict the experiencer's expectations function as a first-person analogue of unexpected experimental results. They indicate the experience is not merely confirming pre-existing belief.
- **Content specificity beyond form.** The neurobiology response to contemplative convergence is genuinely strong at the level of *form*: human brains share near-identical architecture, so convergent categories of altered-state experience—similar emotional registers, similar visual geometry, similar dissolution patterns when the Default Mode Network goes offline—are expected from shared hardware alone. But as [AMR](#) argues in detail, shared architecture does not account for the discriminating *content* features of actual reports: experiencers consistently describe these states as *more* vivid and structured than ordinary waking perception (neurological disruption predicts the opposite); reports frequently include structured information the experiencer did not possess; in group settings, independent observers converge not merely on the *type* of experience but on its specific *content*; and many reports contradict the experiencer's prior beliefs and cultural training. The neurobiology response explains *that* convergence occurs; it does not explain *what* converges.
- **Systematic training and repeatability.** Contemplative lineages have developed rigorous training protocols precisely to distinguish genuine insight from projection. This is

not laboratory replication, but it is a form of reproducibility: trained practitioners across generations converge on the same phenomenological markers through the same methods.

Note that the *anatta/Atman* disagreement, often cited as evidence of irreconcilable contradiction, may itself reflect interpretive framing rather than phenomenological divergence. Both traditions report dissolution of the ordinary sense of separate self; they diverge at the level of metaphysical interpretation of that dissolution. The phenomenological convergence is the evidence; the metaphysical labeling is theory. First-person adjudication, like third-person adjudication, must distinguish observation from interpretation.

VII. Relation to the Project

This essay fills a structural gap between existing essays:

- **MMN** exposes hidden ontological commitments.
- **AMR** exposes asymmetric tolerance for speculation.
- **This essay** exposes asymmetric epistemic authority that persists after ontological revision.

Together, they form a diagnostic sequence:

1. You cannot avoid metaphysics. (MMN)
2. Your “caution” is selective. (AMR)
3. Your epistemology still carries physicalist residue. (This essay)

The sequence prevents a common failure mode: accepting consciousness-first ontology in principle while continuing to evaluate it by physicalist epistemic standards—thereby guaranteeing it will appear inadequate.

VIII. Conclusion

Consciousness-first ontology, rigorously developed, challenges not only what exists but how we can know. The shift from “consciousness emerges from matter” to “matter appears within consciousness” requires corresponding revision of epistemic assumptions.

Without that revision, physicalist epistemology persists as a silent constraint—limiting which evidence counts, which methods are legitimate, and which forms of consciousness are permitted to know. The result is consciousness-first metaphysics evaluated by physicalist standards: a framework guaranteed to seem inadequate because the rules of assessment remain tilted against it.

The project’s methodological essays have cleared the ontological ground. This essay extends that work to epistemic ground. The two are inseparable: you cannot take consciousness seriously as fundamental while continuing to treat it as epistemically second-class.

What remains is to develop these implications systematically—not as polemic but as clarification, not as critique of others but as self-examination of assumptions that survive even deliberate ontological revision.

The goal is not merely consciousness-first ontology but **consciousness-first inquiry**: a research program where the subject matter is permitted to shape the methods, rather than being forced into methods designed for something else entirely.

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[Myth of Metaphysical Neutrality \(mmn\)](#) — Why neutrality is impossible

[Asymmetric Methodological Restraint \(amr\)](#) — Exposes selective application of skepticism

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