

Reflexive Awareness

Cross-Traditional Convergence

Project: [Return to Consciousness](#)

Author: Bruno Tonetto

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.

Finalized: February 2026

Abstract

Under standard physicalist epistemology, reports of awareness that knows itself without ego, narration, or subject–object structure are classified as confusion or confabulation before their epistemic status is even assessed. The disqualification is not the outcome of investigation but its precondition — built into what counts as legitimate experience. This essay examines what becomes visible once that precondition is removed. If the insistence that genuine knowing requires a brain and a subject–object structure is an assumption rather than a necessity, the cross-traditional reports of non-egoic reflexive awareness — arising independently across Buddhist, Advaitic, Christian contemplative, and Daoist traditions — become legible as data rather than dismissible as confusion. The essay surveys these reports at a structural level, distinguishes carefully between subjectivity, experience, reflexive awareness, meta-consciousness, and egoic selfhood, and shows that what emerges is not mystical agreement but a coherent phenomenological pattern — one that any complete account of consciousness must address.

Keywords: reflexive awareness · non-egoic consciousness · cross-traditional phenomenology · Buddhist philosophy · Advaita Vedanta · Christian mysticism · Daoism · subject-object structure

Scope and Dependency

This essay presupposes and builds upon:

Asymmetric Methodological Restraint, which exposes selective enforcement of epistemic caution against consciousness-first frameworks

Epistemic Authority After Ontological Inversion, which diagnoses residual physicalist assumptions at the level of what counts as legitimate knowledge

Without those arguments, the question addressed here cannot be responsibly asked. With them, it becomes unavoidable.

What this essay does:

- Examines why certain phenomenological reports become legible once constraints are lifted
- Distinguishes carefully between related but distinct concepts (subjectivity, experience, reflexive awareness, meta-consciousness, egoic selfhood)
- Surveys cross-traditional convergence at a structural level
- Maintains strict separation between phenomenological description and metaphysical conclusion

What this essay does not do:

- Defend perennial philosophy as a doctrinal position
- Argue for spiritual truth claims
- Collapse phenomenology into metaphysics
- Compete with *The Cosmic Journey*'s narrative role

Its value lies precisely in **not** making positive ontological commitments beyond what the project already allows.

I. The Question That Becomes Askable

The Blocked Question

Under standard physicalist epistemology, a certain question is blocked before it can be asked:

What is the epistemic status of widespread reports of awareness that knows itself without ego, narration, or subject–object structure?

The question is blocked because the implicit assumption—that legitimate knowledge requires brain-mediated, reportable, representational meta-consciousness—disqualifies the reports in advance. If knowing requires a knower distinct from the known, then “awareness aware of itself without subject–object split” is not knowing at all. It is at best a peculiar brain state, at worst confabulation or mysticism.

The Unblocked Question

Once *Asymmetric Methodological Restraint* exposes the selectivity of this prohibition, and *Epistemic Authority After Ontological Inversion* diagnoses its persistence even after ontological revision, the question transforms:

If brain-dependent meta-consciousness is not the only legitimate form of knowing, what do we make of the cross-cultural convergence of reports describing awareness that knows itself without the usual epistemic apparatus?

This is not a question about whether these reports are true. It is a question about whether they deserve analytic attention—whether they form a coherent phenomenological pattern that a complete account of consciousness must address.

II. Terminological Precision

The question cannot be addressed without distinguishing concepts that are often conflated. The following distinctions are stipulative—offered for clarity, not as claims about ultimate reality.

Subjectivity

The fact that experience occurs *for* something—that there is a perspective, a “what it is like.” Subjectivity is the most general term: wherever there is experience, there is subjectivity.

Experience

The qualitative character of conscious states—colors, sounds, emotions, thoughts as they appear. Experience is the *content* of subjectivity.

Reflexive Awareness

Awareness that is somehow aware of itself. This is broader than meta-consciousness: it does not require conceptualization, representation, or a subject–object structure. A mirror reflects without representing. Reflexive awareness may be structurally self-illuminating without being self-*conscious* in the ordinary sense.

Meta-Consciousness

A specific form of reflexive awareness: the capacity to know that one is experiencing, to form beliefs about one’s mental states, to report on experience. Meta-consciousness is representational, conceptual, and typically requires cognitive apparatus. It is what we ordinarily mean by “being self-aware.”

Egoic Selfhood

The sense of being a bounded, continuous, narrative self—the “I” that owns experiences, has a history, makes plans. Egoic selfhood is constructed through memory, anticipation, and social mirroring. It is what we typically mean by “having a self.”

The Key Distinction

The conflation to avoid is this: treating **reflexive awareness** as identical to **meta-consciousness**, and treating both as requiring **egoic selfhood**.

This conflation is not logically necessary. It is a product of physicalist epistemology, which assumes that: - awareness without representational structure is not really awareness - knowing without a knower is incoherent - selfhood is the precondition rather than a particular configuration of awareness

Once these assumptions are examined rather than assumed, space opens for a different possibility: **awareness that knows itself without being a self knowing itself**.

III. The Phenomenological Pattern

What Contemplatives Report

Across traditions, contemplative practitioners report states with a distinctive structure:

1. **Awareness present:** There is experience, not unconsciousness
2. **Content absent or minimal:** The usual stream of perceptions, thoughts, and emotions is absent or deeply backgrounded

3. **Subject–object structure dissolved:** There is no sense of an observer observing something; awareness and its “object” are not distinguished
4. **Reflexivity intact:** Yet this is not a blank—awareness is somehow present to itself, “self-luminous”
5. **Ego absent:** There is no sense of being a bounded self having this experience
6. **Reportable retrospectively:** Practitioners can describe the state afterward, though they emphasize that description necessarily distorts

Cross-Traditional Examples

Advaita Vedanta describes *turiya*—the “fourth state” beyond waking, dreaming, and deep sleep. It is characterized as pure awareness without object, self-luminous (*svayam-prakasha*), not dependent on anything external for its knowing of itself.

Buddhism describes *rigpa* (Dzogchen) or *shikantaza* (Zen)—awareness resting in its own nature without grasping at objects or constructing a self. The Dzogchen tradition explicitly distinguishes this from ordinary consciousness (*sems*) and from unconsciousness.

Christian Mysticism describes states of “infused contemplation” where the soul rests in God without images, concepts, or sense of separate self. The anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* writes of a “naked intent” directed toward God, stripped of all particular thoughts.

Sufism describes *fana* (annihilation) followed by *baqa* (subsistence)—the dissolution of the ego-self revealing a deeper awareness that witnesses without being separate from what is witnessed.

Kashmir Shaivism describes *vimarsha*—the self-reflective capacity of consciousness that is not a second act added to awareness but intrinsic to awareness itself.

The Convergence

The convergence is not doctrinal. These traditions disagree about metaphysics, theology, practice, and cosmology. What converges is a **phenomenological structure**:

- awareness present
- objects minimal or absent
- subject–object structure dissolved
- reflexivity preserved
- ego absent

This pattern appears wherever contemplative investigation reaches a certain depth, regardless of the tradition’s conceptual framework.

IV. Why This Becomes Legible Now

The Previous Illegibility

Under physicalist epistemology, these reports were illegible—literally unreadable as epistemic content. They could only be interpreted as:

- **Unusual brain states:** Interesting neurologically, but not conveying knowledge about the nature of awareness itself
- **Confabulation:** Practitioners misremember or misinterpret what they experienced

- **Metaphor:** Descriptions are poetic, not literal—no one actually experiences “awareness without subject”
- **Mystification:** The reports are deliberately obscure to maintain religious authority

None of these interpretations engage the reports as potential phenomenological data.

The Mechanism of Illegibility

Epistemic Authority After Ontological Inversion identified the mechanism: physicalist epistemology grants legitimacy only to knowledge that can be third-personally verified or reduced to brain-correlated states. First-person reports count as data only when they correlate with something measurable.

But the contemplative reports describe a state where: - there is no representational content to correlate with - there is no ego-self to serve as reporter - the usual subject–object structure that makes “observation” possible is absent

Under physicalist criteria, such reports literally cannot be knowledge. They fall outside the category.

The Restored Legibility

Once the criteria are examined rather than assumed—once it is recognized that restricting legitimacy to brain-correlated, representable states is a choice, not a logical necessity—the reports become legible as a different kind of data.

Not proof. Not self-validating testimony. But a coherent phenomenological pattern that: - appears cross-culturally - is reported by practitioners with extensive training - has internal consistency - resists alternative explanations (why would unrelated traditions confabulate the same structure?)

This pattern now enters the space of things that require explanation under any complete account of consciousness.

V. What the Convergence Does and Does Not Establish

What It Does Not Establish

It does not validate the doctrines of the traditions. Buddhism, Vedanta, and Sufism disagree about much. The phenomenological convergence does not arbitrate their metaphysical disputes.

It does not establish contemplative testimony as infallible. Practitioners can be mistaken, biased, or influenced by expectation. The convergence is evidence, not proof.

What It Does Establish

It establishes that a coherent phenomenological pattern exists. Across cultures, trained practitioners report a distinctive structure of awareness. This pattern requires explanation.

It establishes that ego is not identical with awareness. If awareness persists while ego is absent, then whatever awareness is, it is not reducible to egoic selfhood. This is a phenomenological finding, not a metaphysical claim.

It establishes that reflexivity does not require representation. The reports describe awareness present to itself without representing itself to itself. This challenges the assumption that self-knowledge requires subject–object structure.

It establishes that dismissal requires justification. The reports can no longer be dismissed simply because they don't fit physicalist categories. If those categories are not self-justifying, then neither is the dismissal.

VI. The Structure of the Convergence

Three Levels

The cross-traditional convergence operates at three distinguishable levels:

Level 1: Phenomenological The raw structure of the reported experience—awareness without object, self-luminosity, absence of ego. This is where convergence is strongest and least dependent on doctrine.

Level 2: Interpretive How traditions conceptualize what is experienced—as union with Brahman, as Buddha-nature, as divine presence, as the nature of mind. This level shows significant divergence.

Level 3: Doctrinal The metaphysical, cosmological, and soteriological frameworks in which the experience is embedded. This level shows the most divergence.

Why Level 1 Matters Most

The phenomenological level (Level 1) is most resistant to the objection that convergence reflects cultural diffusion or shared cognitive biases. If traditions with radically different interpretive and doctrinal frameworks report the same phenomenological structure, then the structure is unlikely to be an artifact of interpretation.

The convergence at Level 1, combined with divergence at Levels 2 and 3, suggests that: - something structurally consistent is being accessed - what it *is* remains underdetermined by the phenomenology - interpretation involves cultural and doctrinal shaping

This pattern is what one would expect if contemplative traditions are independently investigating something real but interpreting it through different conceptual lenses.

VII. Addressing Objections

Objection 1: Shared Neural Architecture

The convergence reflects shared human neural architecture, not discovery of anything real. All humans have similar brains, so extreme states produce similar experiences.

Response: This objection does not explain the specificity of the convergence. Many extreme states (psychosis, intoxication, fever delirium) do not produce this particular structure. If neural architecture explained the pattern, we would expect it in other altered states. We don't.

Moreover, the objection assumes what it needs to prove—that the experience is “produced by” the brain rather than “revealed when” certain cognitive functions are suspended. The neural correlation is compatible with both interpretations.

Objection 2: Selection Bias

We remember the convergent cases and forget the divergent ones. Traditions that reported different structures are lost to history.

Response: The major contemplative traditions have extensive documentation spanning millennia. They disagree on much—doctrines, practices, cosmologies. The convergence on this particular phenomenological structure stands out against a background of disagreement. If selection bias were operating, we would expect to see convergence on many structures, not specifically this one.

Objection 3: Expectation Effects

Practitioners are trained in what to experience. They report what they're taught to expect.

Response: This objection has force for interpretive and doctrinal levels, where training clearly shapes what practitioners say. But at the phenomenological level, different traditions train practitioners to expect different things. Buddhists expect to discover emptiness (*shunyata*); Vedantins expect to realize Brahman; Christians expect union with God. Yet they report a convergent phenomenological structure beneath these different expectations.

If expectation determined experience, we would expect divergence at the phenomenological level matching divergence at the doctrinal level. We see the opposite.

Objection 4: Ineffability and Confabulation

The experience is ineffable, so any report is confabulation. The convergence is in the confabulation, not the experience.

Response: Practitioners agree that full description is impossible—but they don't conclude that all description is equally wrong. They distinguish better and worse descriptions, correct and incorrect characterizations. If the experience were entirely ineffable, this discrimination would be impossible.

The convergent structure—awareness present, objects absent, reflexivity preserved, ego absent—is precisely what practitioners *don't* say is confabulated. They say their doctrinal interpretations may be inadequate, but the basic structure is what they actually experienced.

VIII. Implications

For Consciousness Studies

If the phenomenological convergence is taken seriously, consciousness studies must expand its evidential base. First-person reports from trained contemplatives cannot be dismissed a priori. They constitute data—fallible, requiring interpretation, but data nonetheless.

This does not mean accepting all contemplative claims. It means treating them as a scientist treats field observations: potentially biased, requiring corroboration, but not excluded in advance from the domain of evidence.

For Philosophy of Mind

The convergence challenges the assumption that reflexivity requires representation. If awareness can be present to itself without representing itself to itself, then theories of consciousness that reduce self-awareness to higher-order representation may be incomplete.

This does not refute those theories. It suggests they may describe one form of reflexivity (meta-consciousness) while missing another (non-representational self-luminosity).

For the Project

This essay completes a line of reasoning:

1. **MMN:** Metaphysical neutrality is impossible; physicalism operates as a hidden default.
2. **AMR:** Methodological restraint is applied asymmetrically against consciousness-first frameworks.
3. **EAA:** Even after ontological revision, physicalist epistemology persists in assumptions about what counts as knowledge.
4. **This essay:** Once those assumptions are cleared, a coherent phenomenological pattern—cross-cultural reports of non-egoic reflexive awareness—becomes visible as data requiring explanation.

The project has not argued that these reports are true, or that awareness is fundamental, or that contemplative traditions are correct. It has argued that the reports cannot be dismissed on methodological grounds that themselves require justification—and that once they are admitted as data, they form a pattern that any complete theory of consciousness must address.

IX. What Remains Undetermined

This essay does not resolve what reflexive, non-egoic awareness ultimately **is**. Multiple interpretations remain open:

Reductive interpretation: The reports describe unusual brain states with a distinctive phenomenology. Awareness without ego is a neurological phenomenon, interesting but not metaphysically significant.

Idealist interpretation: The reports describe awareness as such—what remains when the dissociative structures of individual mind are suspended. This is universal consciousness glimpsed directly.

Neutral interpretation: The reports describe something real about consciousness that neither physicalism nor idealism adequately captures. A new framework is needed.

Deflationary interpretation: The reports describe a phenomenological structure but metaphysical interpretation is permanently underdetermined. We should attend to the structure without claiming to know what it is.

The essay takes no position on which interpretation is correct. Its contribution is more modest: **clearing the ground so the question can be asked.**

Conclusion

Once inherited epistemic constraints are examined rather than assumed, a question that was previously blocked becomes askable: What do we make of the widespread, cross-cultural reports of awareness that knows itself without ego, representation, or subject–object structure?

This essay has shown that: - The reports form a coherent phenomenological pattern - The pattern appears across traditions with divergent doctrines - Convergence at the phenomenological level is resistant to standard debunking explanations - The reports cannot be dismissed simply because they don't fit physicalist categories - Multiple metaphysical interpretations remain open

The appropriate response is not belief, but inquiry. Not adoption of contemplative conclusions, but recognition that their phenomenological findings constitute data. Not proof that awareness is fundamental, but acknowledgment that any complete account of consciousness must explain why trained investigators across cultures, using different methods and expecting different results, converge on this particular structure.

The project has cleared the ground. What grows there remains to be seen.

References

Philosophy of Mind

Chalmers, David J. *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory*. Oxford University Press, 1996.

Rosenthal, David M. "Two Concepts of Consciousness." *Philosophical Studies* 49, no. 3 (1986): 329–359.

Block, Ned. "On a Confusion About a Function of Consciousness." *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 18, no. 2 (1995): 227–247.

Phenomenology and Contemplative Studies

Thompson, Evan. *Waking, Dreaming, Being: Self and Consciousness in Neuroscience, Meditation, and Philosophy*. Columbia University Press, 2014.

Varela, Francisco J., Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch. *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*. MIT Press, 1991.

Forman, Robert K. C., ed. *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy*. Oxford University Press, 1990.

Shear, Jonathan. *The Inner Dimension: Philosophy and the Experience of Consciousness*. Peter Lang, 1990.

Buddhist Philosophy

Dunne, John D. *Foundations of Dharmakīrti's Philosophy*. Wisdom Publications, 2004.

Dreyfus, Georges B. J. *Recognizing Reality: Dharmakīrti's Philosophy and Its Tibetan Interpretations*. SUNY Press, 1997.

Williams, Paul. *The Reflexive Nature of Awareness: A Tibetan Madhyamaka Defence*. Curzon Press, 1998.

Advaita Vedanta

Deutsch, Eliot. *Advaita Vedanta: A Philosophical Reconstruction*. East-West Center Press, 1969.

Fort, Andrew O. *The Self and Its States: A States of Consciousness Doctrine in Advaita Vedānta*. Motilal Banarsidass, 1990.

Christian Mysticism

McGinn, Bernard. *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*. Crossroad, 2001.

Turner, Denys. *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism*. Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Kashmir Shaivism

Dyczkowski, Mark S. G. *The Doctrine of Vibration: An Analysis of the Doctrines and Practices Associated with Kashmir Shaivism*. SUNY Press, 1987.

Related Essays in This Project

Available at: <https://returntoconsciousness.org/>

[Myth of Metaphysical Neutrality \(mmm\)](#) — Exposes physicalism as hidden default, not neutral ground

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

[Epistemic Authority \(eaa\)](#) — The epistemic constraints this essay addresses

[Consciousness Structure \(cst\)](#) — The boundary-coherence framework that models the structural dynamics of awakening

[Phenomenology of Awakening \(poa\)](#) — Examines the process by which the awareness described here comes to be recognized

[Suffering and Consciousness \(sac\)](#) — Develops the structural analysis of suffering and its relationship to what awakening discloses

[The Cosmic Journey \(tcj\)](#) — Worldview narrative extending these insights

License

This work is made freely available under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0). You are free to share and adapt the material for any purpose, even commercially, provided you give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. To view a copy of this license, visit creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0.