

Epistemic Authority

What Ontology Leaves Unresolved

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.

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Abstract

This essay is part of the *Return to Consciousness* project—a series of interconnected essays examining consciousness-first metaphysics as an alternative to physicalism. Here I examine a structural problem that emerges after ontological revision: **consciousness-first metaphysics can coexist with physicalist epistemic privilege unless the latter is explicitly examined and displaced**. The project’s earlier essays *Myth of Metaphysical Neutrality* and *Asymmetric Methodological Restraint* successfully expose physicalism as an unjustified default at the level of *ontology*. But a subtler asymmetry persists at the level of *epistemology*—in assumptions about what counts as legitimate knowledge, which forms of consciousness are permitted to “know,” and where first-person access sits in the hierarchy of explanation. This essay diagnoses that persistence and argues that ontological inversion without epistemic revision is incomplete.

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, 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) makes this explicit: universal consciousness can coherently be meta-conscious without depending on dissociated biological systems for that capacity. The denial often reflects residual scientific bias rather than logical entailment.

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.

Under physicalism, this asymmetry 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.

This does not mean first-person reports are infallible or that third-person methods are useless. It means the *default authority* should not automatically favor third-person description when the subject matter is experience itself.

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.

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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Related Essays in This Project

Available at: <https://brunoton.github.io/return-to-consciousness/>

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

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

[Return to Consciousness \(rtc\)](#) — The core framework

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