

# Two Fallacies of Nondual Experience: Ontological Closure and Epistemic Inflation

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## Abstract

This paper examines two symmetrical fallacies that shape much of the discourse on nondual experience. The first consists in treating such experience—especially the dissolution of the subject–object distinction—as direct evidence for a determinate metaphysical ontology, such as cosmic consciousness. The second consists in adopting such an ontology and then speaking as if it were grounded in one’s own realization, thereby implicitly occupying an epistemic position for which one’s own experience provides no sufficient warrant.

Both fallacies arise from a common source: the indeterminate character of nondual experience. Introducing the concept of pre-subjective openness, the paper argues that this experiential field is phenomenologically compelling yet ontologically underdetermined. It can support multiple, mutually incompatible interpretations, none of which is uniquely warranted by the experience itself.

The central thesis is that nondual experience does not justify ontological closure, and that maintaining the distinction between experience, interpretation, and epistemic authority is essential if epistemic inflation is to be avoided.

**Keywords:** nondual experience; ontological underdetermination; pre-subjective openness; epistemic inflation; spiritual authority; metaphysical interpretation; phenomenology of meditation; cosmic consciousness; subject–object distinction; ontological closure

# 1. Introduction: Experience, Interpretation, and Ontological Claim

In preceding analyses, the phenomenological structure of nondual or meditative experience has been examined with particular attention to the suspension of the subject–object distinction and the emergence of a mode of awareness no longer organized around a perspectival center (1, 2). These analyses have emphasized the distinctive character of such states without committing them to a specific metaphysical interpretation.

Yet it is precisely here that a recurrent difficulty arises. Nondual experience rarely remains confined to phenomenological description. It is almost invariably taken to disclose something ultimate about reality. What is encountered as unity, openness, or the absence of differentiation is frequently drawn into a metaphysical vocabulary, often in terms of a universal consciousness.

These ontological interpretations do not remain abstract. They are taken up within discourse and articulated in ways that often blur the distinction between conceptual understanding and experiential realization. Statements about the nature of reality are then expressed as if they were grounded in direct insight, even where the experiential basis for such claims remains indeterminate.

This development has a further, often overlooked consequence. Where metaphysical claims are treated as expressions of insight, they can function as markers of epistemic authority. To speak about reality in ultimate terms is not only to describe how things are; it is also, implicitly, to position oneself in relation to that reality. Thus the transition from experience to ontology can feed into a second, inverse movement: ontology is reappropriated as if it were experientially grounded, thereby supporting forms of authority that are not explicitly claimed, yet nevertheless enacted.

The present paper argues that these two movements—deriving ontology from experience and reappropriating that ontology as if it were grounded in one's own realization—form a symmetrical pair of fallacies. While each has

been noted in different contexts, their systematic interrelation and practical consequences have not been sufficiently analyzed.

The aim of the following investigation is threefold. First, it clarifies the phenomenological features of nondual experience without prematurely fixing their ontological status. Second, it shows how the transition from experience to metaphysics introduces a layer of interpretation that is often overlooked. Third, it analyzes how such interpretations, once adopted, can function performatively to support implicit claims of epistemic authority.

To this end, the paper introduces the concept of pre-subjective openness as a way of articulating the experiential field in question without collapsing it into a determinate ontology. On this basis, it argues that nondual experience is ontologically underdetermined: it admits of multiple, mutually incompatible interpretations, none of which is uniquely warranted by the experience itself.

Recognizing this underdetermination not only reframes the relation between experience and metaphysics. It also brings into view the subtle mechanisms through which metaphysical language can acquire an authority that exceeds its experiential grounding. What appears as insight may, in part, be the result of an unexamined transition from experience to ontology—and back again.

## **2. From Experience to Metaphysics: The First Fallacy**

The first fallacy consists in treating nondual or meditative experience as direct evidence for a determinate metaphysical ontology. In its most characteristic form, a transformation in the structure of experience—especially the dissolution of the subject–object distinction—is taken to reveal the fundamental nature of reality itself. What appears phenomenologically as unity, boundlessness, or emptiness is thereby taken to reveal an underlying ground of being, often articulated in terms of a universal or cosmic consciousness.

At first glance, this transition appears almost inevitable. When the ordinary markers of subjectivity fall away and experience no longer presents itself as perspectively confined, it acquires a quality of universality. Likewise, when determinate contents recede, what remains can be described as an open or empty field. These features naturally invite a metaphysical reading: what is

no longer experienced as “mine” is taken to be universal, and what is no longer determinate is taken to be the ground of all determination.

Yet this transition from phenomenology to ontology is not compelled by the experience itself. Nondual experience, insofar as it can be described at all, is characterized by a form of indeterminacy: distinctions fall away, but no positive ontological structure is thereby disclosed. Terms such as “unity,” “emptiness,” or “boundlessness” function as phenomenological approximations, not as ontological determinations. To treat them as such is to move beyond description into metaphysical construction.

This step is often obscured by the immediacy and intensity of the experience. Because the transformation of consciousness is so radical, it presents itself with a strong sense of evidential force. Yet this force belongs to the phenomenological level. It concerns how the experience is given, not what it ultimately is. The conviction that one has encountered the fundamental nature of reality is therefore better understood as a feature of the experience’s mode of presentation than as a reliable indicator of its ontological status.

Once this interpretative step has been taken, however, the consequences are far-reaching. The experience is no longer regarded as a particular modification of consciousness, but as an instance of a universal reality. What was initially a suspension of differentiation becomes reinterpreted as access to an underlying unity that is taken to be always and everywhere present.

In this way, the ontologization of experience does not merely overextend its epistemic scope; it also prepares the ground for the second fallacy. Only because nondual experience has already been interpreted as access to an absolute reality does it become possible to treat one’s own experience—however limited or ambiguous—as participation in that reality. At that point, conceptual understanding can begin to present itself as experiential realization.

### **3. The Second Fallacy: Performing Ontology**

On this basis, the second fallacy can be understood not as an isolated error, but as the continuation of a prior interpretative move. Once the

indeterminate openness of experience has been reinterpreted as absolute or cosmic consciousness, the conditions are in place for a subtle but decisive shift: experience is no longer merely described, but implicitly authorized.

This shift does not typically take the form of an explicit claim. Those involved may sincerely deny any intention of self-elevation, insisting that they are simply expressing what appears evident or articulating a received teaching. Such denials may be genuine. Yet they leave untouched the structural mechanism at work, because the issue does not lie primarily in what is overtly claimed, but in the position from which it is said.

The decisive effect of prior ontologization is that it transforms the relation between experience and standpoint. If what is encountered in nondual experience is understood as the ultimate nature of reality, then any access to this domain—even if partial, unstable, or ambiguously interpreted—can be taken to license statements about reality as such. The threshold for speaking in universal terms is thereby significantly lowered.

This creates a characteristic form of epistemic overextension. The individual does not need to claim full realization. It is sufficient that their experience is interpreted within a framework that already equates it with participation in an absolute. The resulting discourse presents itself as grounded in insight, while its actual basis may remain within the limits of ordinary or only minimally transformed experience.

The crucial point is that this process allows individuals to speak from a standpoint they do not explicitly claim, but nevertheless enact. The metaphysical vocabulary—unity, nonduality, cosmic consciousness—functions here not merely descriptively, but performatively. It situates the speaker within a horizon that, in its original context, presupposes a radical transformation of consciousness.

This is why the fallacy is difficult to identify and even more difficult to contest. Since no explicit claim to realization is made, there is often nothing to refute at the level of assertion. Yet the structure of the discourse already presupposes what it does not declare: a standpoint of insight into the nature of reality. The overreach is therefore not stated, but embedded in the mode of articulation itself.

The second fallacy can therefore be formulated as follows:

It does not consist in explicitly claiming realization, but in speaking from a position that presupposes it without possessing the experiential grounds that would justify it.

In this sense, the performative appropriation of ontology is inseparable from its prior construction. Only because experience has been overinterpreted as access to an absolute can it subsequently be overextended into a basis for epistemic positioning. The second fallacy is therefore not merely the inverse of the first; it is its practical consequence.

## **4. The Structural Source: From Indeterminacy to Projection**

The two fallacies analyzed so far are not accidental errors, nor are they merely the result of insufficient reflection. They arise from a deeper structural feature of nondual experience itself: its radical indeterminacy. Nondual experience, insofar as it can be described, is characterized by the suspension of the distinctions that ordinarily structure experience—between subject and object, self and world, inner and outer. What remains is not a new determinate content, but a field of openness in which no specific structure is given priority. This field can be indicated, but not fully specified. Its indeterminacy should not, however, be misunderstood as phenomenological vagueness: the experience may be vivid, powerful, and highly determinate in its mode of givenness. What remains indeterminate is not the experience itself, but its ontological interpretation.

This ontological indeterminacy generates interpretative pressure. Human cognition is not well suited to remain with indeterminacy. Faced with an experiential field that resists clear ontological specification, it tends to stabilize it by projecting familiar categories onto it. In the case of nondual experience, this projection follows a recognizable pattern: indeterminacy is reinterpreted as potentiality, openness as ground, and absence of limitation as universality. What is experientially absent is thereby converted into metaphysical presence.

This conversion is reinforced by the phenomenological force of the experience itself. Because nondual states often involve a profound sense of immediacy and self-evidence, the resulting interpretations inherit this sense of certainty. What is in fact a projection may then appear as direct insight. The transition from experience to ontology thus remains largely invisible to the one undergoing it.

The same indeterminacy also enables epistemic overextension. Once openness has been identified with an absolute reality, even limited or ambiguous experiences can be mapped onto this framework. The lack of clear criteria for what counts as realization makes it difficult to draw a boundary between genuine transformation and conceptual appropriation.

The two fallacies are therefore structurally linked. The first stabilizes indeterminacy by projecting a determinate ontology onto it; the second extends this stabilized ontology back onto experience in a way that authorizes epistemic claims. What appears as two distinct errors is in fact a single process unfolding in two directions: from indeterminacy to ontological projection, and from ontological projection to epistemic positioning.

The implication is that neither fallacy can be adequately addressed in isolation. To critique the second without addressing the first leaves intact the very framework that makes epistemic overextension possible. Conversely, to analyze the first without considering its performative consequences overlooks the ways in which metaphysical interpretations shape not only what is thought, but how subjects position themselves within a field of authority.

Nondual experience thus confronts thought with a limit: an experience that resists determination. The fallacies arise when this limit is transformed into determinate content. Recognizing this dynamic makes it possible to preserve the phenomenological integrity of the experience without collapsing it into ontology or appropriating it as a basis for epistemic authority.

## **5. Pre-Subjective Openness**

The foregoing analysis has shown that both the ontologization of nondual experience and its subsequent performative appropriation arise from a

common source: the attempt to stabilize an intrinsically indeterminate experiential field. If this dynamic is to be interrupted, a different conceptual approach is required—one that allows this field to be articulated without converting it into a determinate ontology.

The notion of pre-subjective openness is introduced for this purpose. It does not designate a substance, a ground, or an underlying reality in the traditional metaphysical sense. Rather, it functions as a phenomenological limit-concept: a way of indicating a dimension of experience in which the distinctions that ordinarily structure consciousness are not yet operative.

In nondual states, the differentiation between subject and object is suspended. What appears in such cases is not a new object of experience, nor a higher-order entity, but a shift in the mode of givenness itself. Experience no longer presents itself as organized around a center or perspective. Instead, it takes on a character of openness that resists localization and determination.

To describe this openness as “pre-subjective” is to emphasize that it is not the achievement of a subject, nor a property belonging to one. “Pre-subjective” does not mean temporally prior to the subject, nor does it name an ontological layer beneath subjectivity. It refers to a mode of experience in which the distinction between subject and object has not yet become operative. It is therefore not something that can be possessed, accumulated, or stabilized as a state.

At the same time, the term “openness” must be handled with care. In the present context, it does not function as an ontological designation of an underlying field that exists independently of experience, nor as the name of a hidden substrate from which determinate phenomena emerge. Such metaphysical interpretations may be developed on other grounds (3), and may even be philosophically legitimate. But they cannot be derived from nondual experience alone. “Openness” here names not a thing, but a phenomenological limit: the suspension of determinate subject–object articulation within the experience itself, a condition in which no specific ontological interpretation has yet taken hold.



This has important consequences for the question of consciousness. Within ordinary discourse, it appears natural to ask whether this dimension is conscious or non-conscious. Yet this question presupposes a distinction that is not applicable at this level. To characterize pre-subjective openness as universal consciousness is to project a determinate category onto what precedes such determinations; to deny that it is conscious is to do the same in the opposite direction. Both moves impose a framework that the experience itself does not provide.

The concept of pre-subjective openness thus serves to preserve the ontological underdetermination of nondual experience. It allows one to acknowledge the reality of the experience—its distinctiveness, its transformative potential—without prematurely fixing its metaphysical status. In doing so, it opens a space in which different interpretations can be understood precisely as interpretations, rather than as direct disclosures of ultimate reality.

This conceptualization also clarifies the limits of epistemic claims. If the experiential field in question is pre-subjective, then it cannot serve as a standpoint from which determinate knowledge about the nature of reality is derived. Nor can it ground a position of epistemic authority. What it affords is not access to a higher-order ontology, but an encounter with the limits of ontological determination itself.

In this sense, pre-subjective openness does not resolve the tension between competing metaphysical accounts; it renders that tension intelligible. It shows why mutually incompatible interpretations can arise from the same experiential source, and why none of them can claim exclusive validity. Rather than closing the question of ontology, it repositions it as a matter of interpretation grounded in, but not dictated by, experience.

## **6. Interpretative Plurality and Ontological Underdetermination**

If nondual experience is understood in terms of pre-subjective openness, then a striking consequence follows: the same experiential field can give rise

to multiple, mutually incompatible ontological interpretations, none of which is uniquely determined by the experience itself.

This plurality is not accidental, nor is it merely the result of cultural variation or conceptual confusion. It reflects a structural feature of the situation. Because the experiential field in question is indeterminate—lacking fixed structure and resistant to precise articulation—it does not constrain interpretation to any single metaphysical framework. Instead, it functions as a common source from which divergent ontological claims can be generated.

Historically and systematically, this is borne out by the wide range of interpretations that have been proposed. The openness encountered in nondual experience has been understood as the manifestation of a universal field of awareness, as the disclosure of an underlying unity of being, as the realization of emptiness devoid of inherent existence, or as a state that admits of no ontological characterization at all. These accounts are not simply different descriptions of the same thing; they embody fundamentally different commitments about the nature of reality.

What unites them is not their content, but their point of departure. Each takes as its basis an experiential field in which ordinary distinctions have been suspended. Yet precisely because this field does not itself specify how it is to be understood, it can be articulated in ways that diverge at the level of ontology.

This situation can be described as ontological underdetermination. The experience provides a strong phenomenological impetus—it presents itself with immediacy and often with a sense of self-evidence—but it does not fix the metaphysical conclusions to be drawn from it. The transition from experience to ontology therefore involves an additional step: the selection and application of a conceptual framework that interprets the indeterminate field in a determinate way.

Once such a framework is adopted, it tends to retroactively structure the experience itself. What was initially encountered as open and indeterminate is now perceived through the lens of a specific ontology. Features of the experience are highlighted, reinterpreted, or reconfigured in accordance with

the chosen framework. Interpretation does not merely follow experience; it feeds back into it, stabilizing and reinforcing a particular understanding.

This feedback loop helps explain the persistence and apparent self-evidence of competing metaphysical positions. Each interpretation, once in place, can draw on experiential confirmation—not because the experience uniquely supports it, but because it has already been shaped in its image. The result is a plurality of internally coherent, experientially anchored, yet mutually incompatible accounts.

From the perspective developed here, this plurality is not a problem to be resolved by selecting the “correct” ontology. Rather, it is a direct consequence of the underdetermined character of the experiential field itself. This does not mean that one must refrain from adopting a metaphysical interpretation altogether. It may be both existentially meaningful and philosophically legitimate to interpret nondual experience within a particular framework—for example, in terms of a metaphysical ground of consciousness, emptiness, unity of being, or another ontological vocabulary. What matters is not the adoption of such a framework as such, but the epistemic status attributed to it.

An interpretation becomes problematic only when it presents itself as uniquely compelled by the experience itself and thereby excludes other possible articulations. The decisive requirement is therefore not interpretative neutrality, but interpretative honesty: one may choose a framework, but one must also sincerely allow that the same experiential field may be interpreted otherwise.

Recognizing this has two important implications. First, it reframes metaphysical disagreement: conflicting ontologies need not be seen as competing descriptions of a fully determinate experiential content, but as alternative articulations of a field that does not, in itself, settle the question. Second, it places a limit on the epistemic authority that can be derived from experience. If the same experience can support incompatible ontological claims, then no single claim can legitimately present itself as directly grounded in that experience.

In this sense, interpretative plurality is not a sign of failure, but an expression of fidelity to the phenomenon. It reflects an attempt to articulate what, by its very nature, exceeds any single conceptual determination. The task is therefore not to eliminate this plurality, but to understand its conditions and to resist the temptation to collapse it into premature ontological closure.

## **7. Epistemic Inflation and Spiritual Authority**

If nondual experience is ontologically underdetermined and open to multiple, mutually incompatible interpretations, then a further question arises: how do specific interpretations come to acquire authority, and how do individuals come to derive authority from them?

The answer lies in a subtle but pervasive dynamic that can be described as epistemic inflation. What begins as an interpretation of an indeterminate experiential field is gradually transformed into a claim of privileged access to reality. This transformation is not secured by additional evidence, but by a shift in how the interpretation is held and articulated.

At the core of this process is a contraction of the distinction between three levels:

- (1) the experience itself,
- (2) its conceptual interpretation, and
- (3) the epistemic status of the subject who articulates it.

When these levels are no longer clearly differentiated, the adoption of a particular ontology can be experienced—and presented—as a form of insight. The individual does not merely endorse a framework, but comes to inhabit it as a standpoint.

Here the underdetermined character of nondual experience plays a decisive role. Because the experiential field does not fix its interpretation, the adoption of a framework can proceed without clear constraints. Yet once adopted, the framework provides a vocabulary through which experience can be continuously interpreted as confirming it. The result is a self-reinforcing structure in which interpretation and experience mutually stabilize one another.

Within such a structure, epistemic inflation becomes difficult to avoid. The individual may begin by cautiously exploring a set of ideas, but as these ideas become integrated into self-understanding, they acquire a different status. Statements about ultimate reality are no longer treated as hypotheses or interpretations, but as expressions of how things are. At the same time, the speaker's relation to these statements shifts: to articulate them is implicitly to claim proximity to the truth they express.

Crucially, this process does not require deliberate self-aggrandizement. It unfolds through ordinary mechanisms of identification and reinforcement. The more consistently a framework is used to interpret experience, the more natural it becomes to speak from within it. Over time, the distinction between adopting a language and occupying the position it implies begins to erode.

The social dimension emerges at this point. In many spiritual contexts, metaphysical claims are not neutral; they are embedded in traditions that associate certain forms of discourse with higher levels of realization. To speak in the language of nonduality, unity, or ultimate reality is therefore not only to make a statement about the world, but also to situate oneself within an implicit hierarchy of understanding.

A further complication arises when the adopted ontology is not presented as the speaker's own discovery, but as a received teaching. In such cases, the speaker may not claim personal realization, but may nevertheless speak as if the authority of the teaching compensated for the absence of direct experiential warrant. Yet inherited authority and first-person realization are not epistemically equivalent. A doctrine may be existentially powerful, spiritually meaningful, or traditionally authoritative without thereby becoming evidence that the speaker occupies the standpoint from which that doctrine could be directly known.

When the performative dimension of such language is not recognized, this positioning can occur without explicit acknowledgment. Individuals may sincerely believe they are merely describing reality, while their discourse simultaneously functions to elevate their epistemic status relative to others. The authority of the ontology is thus transferred, often unintentionally, to the speaker.

This dynamic also helps explain why the second fallacy is so resistant to critique. Any attempt to question the epistemic standing of such claims can be interpreted as a lack of understanding or as evidence of being confined to a lower level of awareness. The framework protects itself by embedding criteria of legitimacy within its own terms. What might otherwise appear as an unwarranted extension is reframed as insight not yet accessible to the critic.

What is required, then, is not another criterion for distinguishing “true” from “false” realization, but a careful analysis of how experience, interpretation, and authority become entangled in discourse.

Epistemic inflation, in this sense, is not a moral failing but a structural possibility. It arises wherever indeterminate experience is stabilized by ontology and then reintroduced into discourse as if it carried intrinsic authority. To resist this dynamic is not to deny the significance of nondual experience, but to prevent its transformation into a basis for unexamined claims to insight.

## **8. Conclusion: Experience Without Ontological Closure**

The analysis developed in this paper has sought to disentangle a set of conceptual and practical confusions that arise at the intersection of nondual experience and metaphysical interpretation. At its center stand two symmetrical fallacies: the projection of ontology onto experience, and the subsequent reappropriation of that ontology as if it were grounded in one’s own realization.

These fallacies are not independent. The second depends on the first: only once the indeterminate openness of nondual experience has been stabilized as a determinate ontology can it be reintroduced as a basis for epistemic positioning. What appears as insight is therefore, at least in part, the result of an interpretative framework that has already transformed the experience in question.

Against this background, the notion of pre-subjective openness was introduced as a way of articulating the experiential field without collapsing it into ontology. This concept does not resolve the tension between competing

metaphysical accounts, but renders it intelligible. It shows why mutually incompatible interpretations can arise from the same experiential source, and why none of them can claim exclusive authority.

The resulting picture is one of ontological underdetermination combined with phenomenological immediacy. Nondual experience presents itself with a force that invites interpretation, yet it does not by itself fix the content of that interpretation. The transition from experience to metaphysics is therefore not evidentially compelled, but interpretatively mediated.

Recognizing this has important consequences. It reframes metaphysical claims arising from nondual experience as interpretative articulations rather than unmediated discoveries. It also places limits on the epistemic authority that can be derived from experience. Finally, it brings into view the performative dimension of such claims: the ways in which they function not only to describe reality, but also to position the speaker within a field of understanding.

To acknowledge these limits is not to diminish the significance of nondual experience. On the contrary, it allows that experience to be taken seriously without burdening it with ontological commitments it cannot justify. What is preserved is its distinctive character: an encounter with the suspension of differentiation, with a field that resists determination and exceeds conceptual closure.

The task, then, is not to extract a final metaphysical doctrine from such experience, nor to forbid metaphysical interpretation as such. One may legitimately adopt a particular framework, whether spiritual, philosophical, or theological. But such adoption remains responsible only so long as it acknowledges its own interpretative character and sincerely allows for other possible articulations of the same experiential field. Only by keeping open the distinction between experience, interpretation, and ontology—and by refusing to convert metaphysical interpretation into epistemic authority—can the integrity of each be preserved.

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