

The Faith She Won't Name

RSM

2026-07-09

Susan Blackmore writes that she is sitting perfectly still in her garden, calming her mind before turning to her work. She wonders what she is doing there. Has she chosen this spot to sit? How much is she doing, and how much is just happening? The buzzing of bees, mapping out a sonic space around her. A movement appears, something at the edge of her field of vision. The flash of an incomplete . . . let it go. But curiosity prevails; she glimpses the fox moving on. Thoughts bubble up: the foxes almost died out but are . . . let it go. The thoughts stop bubbling up. Did she do that? No, it was a trick she learned decades ago. But how does the trick work if she cannot do anything of her own accord? Her meditation over, she stands up. Her hand reaches to pick raspberries. Another flash: it felt like something she intended.

Blackmore shares these and other thoughts in a recent essay published on the Spiritual Naturalist Society website. The writing is beautiful — precise, unhurried, earned through practice. Blackmore has practiced Zen for decades and has studied consciousness professionally for even longer. She is not a casual observer. She is reporting from the field, with the discipline of someone who has spent a lifetime learning to see what is actually happening rather than what she expects to find.

What she finds is richness, interdependence, and actions that seem to require intent and agency.

Then she applies her intellectual framework and scientific view of the world, and everything she has just described gets flattened.

“No one is acting,” she writes. There is no self, no agency, no point. The hand reaching for the raspberries was not directed by anyone. The curiosity that turned her eyes toward the fox was not hers — it was “just stuff happening.” The felt sense that she chose, that she attended to, that she practiced — all of it is confabulation, a story told after the fact by a brain that was going to do what it did regardless. She knows this because the universe appears to be causally closed, and in a causally closed universe, consciousness can do nothing.

At one point, she writes: “Help!!!”

And later: “help, help, and again help.”

These are not rhetorical flourishes.

I want to take Blackmore seriously — perhaps more seriously than her admirers often do. The usual response to a piece like hers is either a sympathetic nod from fellow physicalists or dismissal from dualists. Neither engages with what she is actually showing us, something more interesting and more troubling than either camp tends to acknowledge.

She is showing us the cost of a commitment. Not the cost of a conclusion carefully arrived at through the accumulation of evidence, but the cost of a position maintained against the continuous pressure of her own experience. She has spent decades training herself not to trust what contemplative practice reveals — and what it reveals, every time, is agency, attention, and the felt reality of a self that is doing something. Her practice keeps producing evidence against her conclusion. Her conclusion holds anyway. And the essay's emotional register — the cries for help, the forced cheer of “just stuff happening,” the effortful insistence that none of it means anything — tells the reader what that holding costs.

The question I want to ask is not whether Blackmore is honest. She is obviously, almost painfully, so. The question is whether the premise that forces her conclusion deserves the loyalty she has given it.

The premise is causal closure: the principle that every physical event has a sufficient physical cause, leaving no room for nonphysical causation. Blackmore names it herself, without drama, as though stating a fact: “The universe seems to be causally closed. That is, everything that happens is caused by something else.”

Causal closure is the bedrock of physicalism. It is what makes the physical sciences self-contained — what guarantees that you will never need to look outside physics to explain a physical event. And its track record, as a methodological principle, is spectacular. Every time science has investigated a physical phenomenon and sought its cause, it has found a physical cause. Lightning is an electrical discharge, not divine anger. Epilepsy is a neural dysfunction, not possession. The history of science is, in one sense, a long demonstration that treating the physical domain as causally self-sufficient is enormously productive.

But there is a difference between a methodological principle and a metaphysical truth, and that difference matters enormously.

As a methodological principle, causal closure says: when investigating physical phenomena, look for physical causes. This is a research strategy, and its success is beyond dispute. As a metaphysical truth, causal closure says something far stronger: physical causes

are all there is. The physical domain is not only self-sufficient for investigation — it is self-sufficient in reality. There is nothing else.

The first claim is supported by evidence, but the second is not. The move from the first to the second — elevating a productive research strategy to a comprehensive claim about the nature of reality — is not a scientific finding. It is a philosophical leap.

Consider how the inductive argument actually works. We have always found physical causes when we've looked for them. True. But we have looked for them with instruments and methods designed to detect physical causes. The failure to detect non-physical causes with tools built to detect physical ones is not independent evidence that non-physical causes don't exist. It reflects the methodology. You don't confirm the completeness of a net by noting that everything you've caught was caught by the net.

Or consider the conservation argument — the intuition that if consciousness did causal work in the physical world, it would have to inject energy from somewhere, violating conservation of energy. This sounds decisive until you notice that energy conservation has an ambiguous status in our most fundamental physical theory. In general relativity, energy is not straightforwardly definable in curved spacetime. There is no unambiguous global conservation of energy in general relativistic cosmology. If the deepest physics we have doesn't guarantee energy conservation at the cosmological scale, building a metaphysical argument on the inviolability of conservation is to build on ground that physics itself has destabilized.

None of this undermines causal closure. It remains a coherent philosophical position and a powerful methodological commitment. But it is a position and a commitment — not a finding, not a result, not something the evidence compels. The evidence is compatible with causal closure. It is also compatible with other frameworks, and that compatibility is the point.

A parallel from physics is illuminating here. In quantum mechanics, competing interpretations yield identical experimental outcomes. The choice among them is entirely underdetermined by the data, meaning a rigorous physicist can adopt any of them without losing their footing. When someone pretends that a single view is “just what the science says,” they are smuggling in a philosophical position under the authority of physics. The exact same sleight of hand occurs when physicalists claim that science has foreclosed the reality of human consciousness.

The same structure applies to the question of agency and consciousness.

Over the past two decades, a convergent body of evidence has emerged from researchers working independently across biology, neuroscience, and the philosophy of mind. Denis Noble has demonstrated multi-level causation in biological systems — the cardiac rhythm constrains ion channel behavior in ways that resist reduction to the molecular level. Michael Levin has found goal-directed cognition in systems without brains — clusters of frog skin cells that self-organize into novel morphologies, navigate their environment, repair themselves, and reproduce, all without a single neuron. Denis Walsh has argued, through careful engagement with evolutionary theory, that organisms are genuine agents whose purposive activity is causally explanatory, not merely a convenient gloss on molecular processes. Kevin Mitchell has made perhaps the most sustained case that agency, purpose, and meaning are real, irreducible, and causally efficacious — that organisms act for reasons and that those reasons do genuine causal work in the world.

None of these findings is empirically disputed. What's in dispute is what they mean.

The physicalist says: all of this is, in principle, compatible with a causally closed microphysical base. The higher-level descriptions — agency, purpose, downward causation — supervene on physical processes. The appearance of genuine top-down causation is a useful shorthand for complexity we haven't yet fully reduced.

The non-physicalist says: all of this is equally compatible with a world in which agency, purpose, and interiority are irreducible features of nature rather than artifacts of our descriptive convenience.

The evidence doesn't choose between these readings. The interpretation does. This is precisely the structure of the quantum case: mutually exclusive metaphysical pictures, empirically indistinguishable, with the choice between them driven by philosophical commitments rather than by experimental results.

This is all that needs to be established. Not that causal closure is wrong — but that it is one interpretation among several equally supported by the evidence. A principled, rigorous thinker can look at the same findings Blackmore examines and adopt a very different worldview without any sacrifice of intellectual seriousness. The evidence permits it. The logic permits it. Only the habit of treating one interpretation as the default prevents it.

Which brings us to the question no one in these conversations wants to ask: what role does faith play in each of these positions?

A Christian holds that reality includes a dimension — transcendent, purposive, and personal — that is not accessible to empirical

verification. This commitment shapes how she interprets experience, makes decisions, and understands her place in the world. She cannot prove God's existence. She believes it anyway, and that belief organizes her life.

A committed physicalist like Blackmore holds that reality is exhaustively physical, that causal closure is true, that consciousness is epiphenomenal or illusory, and that the felt experience of agency is a confabulation. She cannot prove any of this. No experiment has demonstrated causal closure. No experiment has shown that consciousness does nothing. No experiment has established that the experience of deliberation is illusory. She believes it anyway, and that belief organizes her life — to the point of decades of deliberate practice aimed at training herself not to trust her own experience.

The structural equivalence is clear. Both positions entail a foundational commitment that exceeds the available evidence. Both shape the believer's interpretation of experience at the deepest level. Both are sustained by ongoing acts of conviction rather than by the accumulation of proof.

Pointing this out provokes fury from the physicalist camp, and that fury is revealing. The entire cultural authority of physicalism — particularly in its New Atheist articulation — depends on an asymmetry: we follow evidence, they follow faith. Observing that physicalism involves its own act of faith collapses that asymmetry, and to the physicalist, that collapse feels like an attack on rationality itself. But it isn't. It's an observation about the logical structure of the commitment.

The physicalist will respond: our faith is different in kind, because it's an extrapolation from a successful track record. We're not believing in something with no evidence — we're extending a methodology that has worked every time it's been applied.

This is the strongest version of the objection, and it deserves a direct answer. The answer is that the track record argument conflates methodological naturalism with metaphysical naturalism. The track record of finding physical causes for physical events is genuinely spectacular. But "we have always found physical causes when we looked for them using tools designed to detect physical causes" is not evidence that physical causes are all there is. The success of a metal detector in finding metal doesn't establish that the beach contains nothing but metal. The inductive base is impressive, but the metaphysical extrapolation goes beyond what the induction supports. And that "beyond" is exactly where faith lives.

What distinguishes Blackmore's faith from the Christian's is not that hers requires less credulity, but that hers is more costly to maintain. The Christian who believes in divine purpose is not required

to deny the reality of her own experience. Quite the opposite — her faith affirms what experience seems to reveal: that consciousness matters, that choices are real, and that the felt sense of meaning corresponds to something actual. Blackmore's faith requires the opposite: a systematic override of first-person evidence, sustained over decades, against the continuous pressure of a contemplative practice that keeps showing her exactly what her framework says cannot be there.

Read the essay again with this in mind. The beauty of her observation. The precision of her attention. The aliveness of the garden around her — the fox, the bees, the hand reaching. And then the willed flattening: none of this means anything, no one is acting, and there is no point. The dissonance between what she sees and what she concludes is not a failure of intelligence. It is the signature of a faith maintained under pressure, and that pressure is coming from inside — from the very practice she has devoted her life to perfecting.

"Help, help, and again help."

That is not the sound of someone who has found the truth and settled into it. That is the sound of someone holding a position despite her own evidence. It is the sound of faith, though she would never call it that. Ironically, Blackmore's position bears more structural resemblance to the religious traditions she defines herself against than to the scientific inquiry she aspires to.

If causal closure is an interpretation rather than a finding, the physicalist picture of the self and its agency is also an interpretation — and a remarkably expensive one.

A consistent physicalist must accept one of three positions on consciousness and free will, each of which exacts a specific cost.

The first is eliminativism: the claim that there is no self, no experience, and no agency. The felt sense that these exist is dismissed as an illusion—a strange choice of words, given that an illusion requires someone to be deceived, and eliminativism denies that anyone is home to be tricked. Blackmore lives in this neighborhood, and her essay is a report on the accommodations.

The problem is entirely performative. It is the philosophical equivalent of writing a detailed book to prove that language does not exist. The position can be defended only by exercising the very capacities it denies. Every argument advanced against the reality of consciousness is an achievement of consciousness. Every deliberate contemplative practice undertaken to expose the illusion of agency is an act of agency. You can maintain its consistency on paper, but only by living in permanent contradiction with your own existence.

The second is epiphenomenalism. Consciousness is real, experience is real, and the self is real in some sense — but none of it does anything. The lights are on and someone is home, yet they have no influence over what happens in the house. Your experience of deliberation, of choosing, of effortful attention — all genuine experiences, all causally inert. The physical brain was going to do what it does regardless; consciousness is along for the ride. This position should trouble any physicalist who takes evolution seriously, because if consciousness does nothing — if it has no causal role whatsoever — then natural selection cannot have selected for it. Consciousness becomes the most elaborate free rider in the history of biology: an enormously costly, metabolically expensive phenomenon, sustained across millions of years of evolution, contributing nothing to fitness. The usual reply is that consciousness is a necessary byproduct of computational complexity. But “necessary byproduct” is itself a claim that demands an explanation of why complexity necessarily produces experience — and that explanation is precisely what no one has.

The third is compatibilism. You redefine “free” to mean “acting in accordance with your own desires without external coercion,” accept that those desires are fully determined by prior physical states, and call the result free will. This is the mainstream position in academic philosophy, and it is defensible on its own terms. But it achieves coherence by changing the subject. The free will it vindicates is not the free will Blackmore is struggling with when she watches her hand reach for the raspberry. Compatibilism tells her: yes, you chose, in the sense that the causal chain ran through your brain rather than bypassing it. But your brain’s state was fully determined by prior physical states over which you had no control, and at no point could the outcome have been different. For a contemplative practitioner who has spent decades attending to the texture of decision, this is not a resolution. It is a relabeling.

Blackmore’s essay enacts all three positions in a single piece of writing. She eliminates the agent, declares consciousness pointless, and then continues to live as a deliberate, choosing, effortful self — directing attention, constructing arguments, and maintaining a discipline that presupposes, at every moment, the very agency she has just denied. The contradiction is not a failure of her thinking. It is the inevitable result of a framework that cannot accommodate what it is trying to describe.

The point of all this is not simply to brand physicalism as wrong, but to expose how unnecessarily expensive it has become. Clinging to it requires a permanent cognitive split-screen: we are forced

to treat our own attention and intent as biological fictions while simultaneously relying on them to live our lives, write our essays, or conduct our experiments.

But dropping physicalism does not mean fleeing into the exotic or the anti-scientific. There are rigorous, naturalistic frameworks that are actually *more* hospitable to the day-to-day reality of both empirical science and human experience. These models don't require us to override the data of our own lives; they simply broaden our understanding of what nature is capable of.

Russellian monism holds that consciousness is the intrinsic nature of what physics describes only structurally — that physics tells us what matter does, its relational and dispositional properties, but is silent on what matter is in itself, and that what it is in itself is experiential or proto-experiential. On this view, mental causation doesn't violate physical laws because the mental isn't an outside force intervening — it's the inside of what's already doing the causing. The energy bookkeeping remains intact.

Dual-aspect monism, as developed by Harald Atmanspacher and drawing on the Pauli-Jung conjecture, treats mind and matter as complementary aspects of an underlying reality that is neither mental nor physical. These aspects arise through acts of distinction — epistemic cuts — from an undivided whole. Physical closure holds within the physical aspect, and mental regularities hold within the mental aspect, but the whole from which both aspects derive is prior to either.

Process philosophy, in the Whiteheadian tradition, embeds experience in the fabric of nature at every level — not as a property that emerges at some threshold of complexity, but as a fundamental feature of what it means to be actual at all. Every actual occasion has an experiential pole. Complexity determines the richness and intensity of experience, not its presence or absence.

These frameworks differ in important ways. They are not interchangeable, and each has its own difficulties. But they share two features that matter for the present argument: they take the empirical findings of science fully seriously, and they do not require the practitioner to override the evidence of her own experience. The fox, the curiosity, the reaching hand — all of it can be exactly what it seems to be: consciousness participating in the world, not watching helplessly from the sidelines of her own life.

And here perhaps the most important point of all deserves its due. It is not necessary to choose among these frameworks with confidence. Thomas Nagel has argued — and I think he is right — that we are not currently in a position to achieve certainty about any comprehensive metaphysical picture. The honest intellectual posture at this moment in history is not to replace one orthodoxy

with another but to hold the question open, to follow the evidence with genuine curiosity rather than predetermined conclusions, and to resist the pressure to settle prematurely on an answer that forecloses possibilities we may not yet be equipped to see.

What matters is not which framework you adopt. What matters is recognizing that the physicalist framework is one among several — that it is an interpretive choice, not a deliverance of reason — and that treating it as the only option consistent with intellectual seriousness is itself an act of faith, however strenuously its adherents deny it.

Return to Blackmore in the garden.

The fox at the edge of her vision. Her hand among the raspberries. The bees mapping their world in sound. The sustained, disciplined attention of a practitioner who has spent a lifetime learning to see.

Everything she describes can remain exactly as she describes it. The interdependence. The absence of a Cartesian homunculus pulling levers from an inner theater. The deep embeddedness of the self in the world — porous, relational, continuous with the garden and the fox and the turning sky. None of that requires a ghost in the machine, and nothing in this essay argues for one.

What it does not require, either, is the conclusion she draws. She does not need to flatten what she sees. She does not need to tell herself that curiosity is no one's, that attention is no one's, or that decades of practice were just stuff happening to no purpose. She does not need to cry for help.

The premise that forces that conclusion — that the universe is causally closed, that consciousness does nothing, and that the self is a confabulation — is a philosophical commitment, not a scientific finding. It is one interpretation of the evidence, maintained at great personal cost, despite the continuous testimony of her own practice. Other interpretations exist. They are rigorous and naturalistic. They honor the evidence rather than overriding it.

The door has been open the whole time. It remains open now.