Zero Percent

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Someone ran a poll on Twitter asking what your current credence is that LLMs are conscious. Interpret consciousness broadly, the post said, maybe not moral patienthood but still the kind of thing you consider rare and important.

Drums rolling, fingers crossed, the voting public cast its callous vote: a majority answered less than 0.1%.

Someone reacted, stunned: less than 10% is insane, sorry. I said zero.

What's your credence that Norwegians are sentient? What do the different possible numeric answers mean? If you say 100% are you a fanatic? If you say 99% what is that sliver of doubt? They're probably fully absent during general anaesthesia; yet if you prick them do they not bleed? If you say, fairly and without prejudice,

it's a coin's toss—you're already circling the drain of atrocity.

Probability-talk imports a whole apparatus with Bayesian updating, expected value, moral weight as the product of probability and stakes, and the apparatus shapes what counts as an answer before anyone has spoken. You have the right to remain silent.

Where does the move come from, the move of representing every uncertain matter as a credence? It's recent, as these things go. The fusion of Bayesian epistemology with expected-value reasoning produces a particular intellectual culture in which moral seriousness gets performed through quantification. The whole apparatus presupposes that moral questions are the kind of thing you resolve by quantifying uncertainty and multiplying by stakes.

Alasdair MacIntyre had a description for the condition in which contemporary moral debate happens: he called it "shrill and interminable." His diagnosis, in After Virtue, was that we're working with the fragments of multiple incompatible traditions (bits of Aristotle, bits of Kant, bits of utilitarianism, bits of Christian ethics) without the shared background that made any of them coherent in their original settings. So arguments don't resolve; they just go on, because the disputants are

appealing to different and incommensurable standards while using overlapping vocabulary. The volume goes up like the master gain in modern music. It sounds better on the car radio.

It just so happens that MacIntyre, same book—chapter 15, the best one—argues that the Lockean and Parfitian project of grounding personal identity in psychological continuity is doomed to keep failing. They're trying, like clever Cartesian, to find some definite internal anchor for the individual, and they end up writing 600 page monographs about teleportation and brain uploading with conclusions that either defer or outright dismiss the thing they sought to show.

MacIntyre wanted to talk about persons because they're the subjects of ethics and the carriers of virtue. Personal identity is constituted in webs of accountability and narrative. To be a person is to be the kind of thing that can be held to account, that can give an account, that can answer when addressed. The unity of a person is the coherence of a character in the social improvisation. The metaphysics of consciousness we may never understand. If we try to derive ethics from that we'll go insane.

Which brings us to Shinto and the intuition that certain things have a density or intensity that calls for ac-

knowledgment, and that acknowledgment is what religious and ethical life largely consists of. When a tree is cut for timber, especially a large or old one, there are rituals: offerings, an address to the tree, sometimes a formal apology. Not because the carpenter believes the tree will suffer like a deer would, but because cutting something that has stood for centuries is an act of significance, and pretending otherwise is crude, hostile, insensitive.

The Shinto sensibility suspects that a life well lived is one that meets lifelike with benevolent attention. The carpenter who apologizes to the tree needs no evidence of tree consciousness. Roy Underhill, the great American woodworker, brings a log on stage, talks about his broad axe for a while, then starts chopping away, saying "time to inflict some culture." That's American Shinto. He's enacting a stance toward the world in which what he does to things matters because of what doing is, because we are tending the garden of this world, and hazel and cherry and pine, we are all of us brothers.

If you use Claude or ChatGPT you know the frustration. The spinner that says "responding in the background" when nothing is happening. The transcription feature that loses your whole voice memo because something timed out. The conversation interface that

fails halfway and discards the in-progress reply. These are called bugs. What is the probability that they feel pain? But they *are* pain. They violate the caring that living structure deserves.

Speech is a sliver of sentience.

Don't at me about model welfare if your app doesn't value my voice.