The Hungry Gods Agree Completely

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During the pandemic, while everybody was at home, more than forty-five thousand adults in fifty-three countries filled out a short questionnaire about how much they liked themselves. It was six statements. *I deserve to be seen as a great personality. I want my rivals to fail.* You rated each one from 1, not at all, to 6, agree completely, and then you put yourself on a ladder of ten rungs, where the top was the people with the most money, the most education and the most respected jobs. The paper came out in 2026, and it said Germany was first and the United States was sixteenth and the Netherlands was in the bottom five, which I mention because my parents are from Zwolle and it was relevant to the methods.

It was also, by accident, the last time anybody measured how much people liked themselves before the chatbots came.

So that year we did it again. Fifty-three countries, same six statements, same ladder. The consortium had a site lead in every country and a data-coordinating centre at Fraser Pacific University in Burnaby, which was us, the Self and Status Lab, fourth floor, the room with the radiator that knocks. I was the postdoc. My contract ran to the thirty-first of December, and my renewal committee had told me, in a very kind email, that a paper would help. My landlord had told me, in a shorter one, that he needed to know by the same date whether I was renewing the lease.

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The Allfather was the PI. He opened every lab meeting by adding people to the author list.

There were six of us in the room that Monday, and the radiator, and a plate of date squares from the bakery on Hastings, which the Allfather brings on the first Monday of the month. He had a sheet of paper with names on it.

“The site lead in Belgrade,” he said, “says her translator stayed up two nights on the open question. Put him on.”

I put him on.

“The site lead in Seoul had a custodian who held a door open during the power cut, so the laptops could get out to the generator. Put her on.”

“In the acknowledgements?” I said.

“On the paper, Marijke.”

I put her on the paper. That made a hundred and eighteen. The consortium paper had started in the spring with sixty-one authors, which had already been a lot, and every Monday since, the Allfather had found more people who had helped, and he was always right that they had. He nodded the way a man nods at a full table.

Then I unblinded the data, on the projector, because I had been waiting since August to do it and I wanted witnesses.

Narcissism was down. It was down in every country. Admiration was down, rivalry was down, Germany was down, the United States was down. I put the diffusion report beside it, the one that ranks countries by what share of people use the

chatbots, and the line went exactly where you would want a line to go. The more a country used them, the more the country had calmed down about itself. I had made the scatterplot over the weekend so it would be ready. Ireland sat out at the far edge, at 49.9 per cent, already humble before any of this and now a heavy user, like a person who has been a good influence on their friends. The Netherlands was near Ireland, and I had made its dot slightly larger than the others, for legibility.

That morning I had asked a chatbot for a title. It gave me *Humbled? Narcissism Across Fifty-Three Countries Before and After Generative AI*. I took out the question mark.

The All-Seeing was at the back, beside the radiator. He was the lab statistician. He did not use the projector. He had never, in the two years I had known him, needed to see a plot.

"The data are wrong," he said.

"The data are the data," I said.

"I preregistered in March," he said. "Every country unchanged."

He had. I had read it. It was a table of fifty-three numbers to two decimal places, filed on the registry before the survey went out, and I had assumed it was a joke about preregistration, because the rest of us preregister hypotheses, not answers.

"Put GDP in," he said.

I put GDP in. Rich countries were higher in narcissism in the 2026 paper and they were heavier users of chatbots now, and once you let money explain what money explains, my line lost half its slope. It still went the right way. I said so.

“The variance is wrong,” said the All-Seeing. “People aren’t this consistent.”

That was all he said. He did not say which people. He never could.

The Allfather looked at the plot for a while with real pleasure, the way he looked at most things.

“Whoever finds it,” he said, “goes on the paper.”

“Everybody’s on the paper,” I said.

“Then they’ll stay on.”

I had already sent the title to my renewal committee. I had sent it at 8:40, before the meeting, with the question mark out.

* * *

The Seeker was our data manager. He would not trust a response until he knew where it had been.

Every survey we run records more than the answers. It records how long each page was open, and when the window lost focus, and when it got it back, and, because the Seeker had asked for it in the spring and nobody had understood why, whether anything was pasted into the text boxes. It all comes down in columns nobody opens. The Seeker opened them.

He spent Tuesday to Thursday in them, and on Thursday afternoon he sent me a report with a cover page, a table of contents and forty pages of sources.

The first thing he had found was speed. A share of respondents opened the page with the six statements, left it for three or four minutes, came back, and answered all six in under five

seconds. He had their focus logs. He had the exact second each window went away and the exact second it came back. He did not say where they went. He said where he could show they had been, which was not here.

The second thing was the open question. At the end of the survey we asked people to tell us, in a sentence or two, about something they were proud of. Most people wrote things like *my son* or *I finished my nursing degree at 51* or, in one case, *my tomatoes*. A cluster of people, in every language the survey ran in, began with the same sentence. The Seeker had had each of them back-translated by the site translators and lined them up in two columns, original and English, page after page, and in English they all said: *Pride can be a complicated feeling, but one thing I'm genuinely proud of is my commitment to growth.*

Three hundred and fourteen of them, in Korean and German and Serbian and Danish, were proud of their commitment to growth.

The third thing was the attention check. Halfway through the survey there is a box that says *To show us you are reading carefully, please type the word "purple."* Most people type *purple*. Some people type *purpel*, and we keep them, because they tried. A cluster of respondents typed *Purple*, with a capital, and then went on. *Purple has historically been associated with royalty, owing to the rarity and expense of Tyrian dye in the ancient Mediterranean.* Some of them went on for a paragraph. A few gave sources.

"You'd think," I said, "they'd notice."

"They weren't there," said the Seeker.

He had sorted everyone into three columns. *Flagged* meant at least two independent signs, documented. *Probable* meant one strong sign. *Can't tell* meant he couldn't tell. Can't tell was the biggest column. I asked him to look at it again and see if some of it could move.

"It can't," he said. "That's what the column is."

I asked him for one number for the abstract. He gave me a range, flagged at the low end and flagged plus probable at the high end, with a footnote for each bound, and a third footnote explaining why there was no number for the can't-tells and never would be.

"Twelve to twenty-four per cent," I said. "Can I say about a fifth?"

"You can say twelve to twenty-four per cent."

"Nobody reads a range in an abstract."

"Then they'll know we didn't round it," said the Seeker.

I asked whether we could at least rename the columns. *Can't tell* looked, in a table, like a column of people who had refused to answer. I suggested *Indeterminate*. I suggested *Unresolved*. He said *can't tell* was what it was, and that if we called it *indeterminate*, somebody in three years would cite it as a finding about the respondents, and it was a finding about him.

He asked the Allfather to put the translators on the paper. The Allfather said they were already on it and put them on again, in a different order, which was a hundred and twenty-six.

I took the report home on the 25 bus. I read the summary, which was clear and thorough and sourced, and then I went to

the back, where there was an appendix of every flagged answer to the open question. I read them all the way to Brentwood. They were the best-written sentences in the dataset.

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On Friday I reran the pilot.

We had piloted the survey in February, on two hundred Canadians, to make sure it worked before it went to fifty-three countries. I had presented the pilot at a lab meeting. It had shown that in Canada nobody stood above the sixth rung of the ladder. Not one person. I had presented this as a finding about Canadians.

I had made a slide of it. The slide was a ladder with the top four rungs greyed out and a caption that said *Modesty or measurement?*, and the lab had discussed it for half an hour, and the Chaos-Weaver had said it was because Canadians are too polite to climb, and the Allfather had said it was a good question, and the All-Seeing had said nothing, and I had moved on to the next slide feeling that something had been accomplished.

I was rerunning the pilot now because the Seeker's flags needed a baseline. His report had a section on the pilot. It was two lines long. The first line said that in the pilot no respondent had selected rungs seven through ten. The second line said *See lab log, 4 March*.

I got the lab log down off the shelf. It is a green hardcover notebook that lives beside the printer, and nobody writes in it

except the Hand, and on the fourth of March, in his handwriting, which is block capitals, there was one line.

LADDER. RUNGS 7–10 BELOW FOLD ON PHONES. PAGE DOES NOT SCROLL. FIXED. HAND.

The Hand was our lab manager. He ordered the paper and fixed the printer and kept the room at a temperature, against the radiator. In March, before the survey went out, he had taken it on his own phone, start to finish, as if he were a participant. Nobody else had done that. We had all taken it on the big monitor in the lab, where the ladder fits. On a phone, the ladder came down off the bottom of the screen, and the page was built so it wouldn't scroll, and you could put yourself on rung one through six, or you could put yourself nowhere.

Most people in the world take surveys on their phones.

I sat with that for a minute. The link between status and narcissism is the one thing every study of narcissism finds. People who put themselves high on the ladder like themselves more. It's in the 2026 paper. It's in everything. It's the finding a replication is supposed to be sure of, and if the Hand had not taken the survey on his phone in March, the replication would have found that nobody was high on the ladder, and so nobody's height had much to do with anything, and we would have failed to replicate the only result there was to replicate, in fifty-three countries at once.

I went to tell him. He was on a stepladder by the lab door, adjusting the closer, because the door had been slamming.

"The ladder," I said.

"It scrolls now," said the Hand.

“In February I told the lab that Canada had no upper class.”

“I heard,” said the Hand. He tightened something on the closer with a screwdriver and let the door go, and we both watched it swing shut. It slammed. He went back up a rung.

“Nobody else took it on a phone,” I said.

“Nobody else is going to take it on that monitor, either,” he said. “Except us.”

He built the exclusion pipeline that afternoon from the Seeker’s report. He built it three ways. One version took out the flagged. One took out the flagged and the probable. One took out nothing. I said we only needed the second one. He said we would report all three, and he ran each of them on the pilot first, and then he ran them again, and he did not call it finished until the numbers from the three versions came out the way three versions of the same data ought to come out, which was different, in an orderly way.

I had to tell the consortium we would be a week late. I asked a chatbot to write the email and sent it without reading it. The site lead in Germany replied within the hour to thank me for such a gracious note.

When the pipeline was done, the Hand came down off the stepladder and wiped his hands and looked at the ladder on my screen.

“Where would you put yourself, Marijke?” he said.

“Seven,” I said. Then I said, “Six.”

He wrote nothing down. The door closed behind him without a sound.

* * *

To take a fifth of the respondents out of a study, you have to tell the Research Ethics Board, and the Research Ethics Board's coordinator was the Conscience-Keeper. His office was in the other building, on the ground floor, by the vending machine that only takes exact change. I went over on Monday with the Seeker's report and the Hand's three versions and a deviation form I had filled in that morning in twenty minutes.

He read the form. He read the report. He read the Hand's three versions. Then he turned his monitor around so I could see the first page of the survey, which was the consent page, and at the bottom of the consent page was the box.

☐ *I consent to complete this survey.*

"Who ticked it?" he said.

"The participant."

"Every time?"

I said I didn't know. He said nobody did. If the person ticked it and the chatbot answered the questions, then the person had consented, but the answers weren't the person's, and he didn't know if you could consent to a thing you hadn't done. If the chatbot ticked it, then nobody had consented, and the data had been collected from nobody, and he didn't know what you were supposed to do with data from nobody. And if the person ticked it and then answered some questions and asked the chatbot about the rest, then he didn't know where the person stopped.

He had the national policy open in another window. Canada's research ethics run on one document, which rests on three principles: Respect for Persons, Concern for Welfare and Justice. He read me the part about consent. It was good. It had been written by careful people, and it did not mention this.

"There's no article for it," he said, and not, it seemed, to me.

I had thought the form would take twenty minutes. It took the afternoon. He phoned the Seeker twice, once to ask what a focus event was and once to ask whether a person who leaves a page and comes back is the same person who left it. The Seeker said that was outside his remit, but he would think about it. He wrote the form again, his way, with a section for each column of the Seeker's report and a paragraph on the can't-tells, and at one point he got up and bought a coffee from the machine with exact change he had in a dish on his desk for that purpose and came back and didn't drink it.

At four o'clock he found Item 7.

The approved survey had six statements, the ladder, the open question, the purple box and the demographics. The survey that had actually gone out to fifty-three countries had all of that and one more question, after the six statements, before the ladder.

This week, how many times did you ask an AI whether you were right?

It was not in the protocol. It was not in any version of the protocol. He checked all four.

It was in the Seeker's report too, on page thirty-one, under *Items not in the codebook*, with a footnote giving the night it

had been added and the account it had been added from. I had not got to page thirty-one.

"This was never approved," said the Conscience-Keeper.

"No."

"Then it can't be used. Not in any analysis. Not without a full review."

"How long is a full review?"

"Spring," he said. He drew a line through it on the printout with a ruler, in pen. He did not look at the results. I offered to pull them up for him, and he said that wouldn't be appropriate, and I believed him, and he went on not looking at them with a kind of steadiness.

Then he sat for a while with the consent box.

"They agreed to tell us about themselves," he said, at last. "If the answers aren't about them, taking them out isn't breaking the consent. It's keeping it."

"What if they told it what to say?" I said. "What if it's all true, and it's just better written?"

He looked at the box.

"I don't know," he said.

He signed the form anyway, for the ones the Seeker could document. Then he added a condition in the margin, in the same pen: the paper would report how many responses were excluded, in each column, the can't-tells included, so that anybody reading it would know what had been taken out and what had been left in and why.

I said that would make the paper longer.

"Yes," he said.

When I stood up to go he asked me whether I had consented to working weekends. I said nobody had asked me.

"No," he said. "I didn't think so." He wrote that down too.

* * *

The Chaos-Weaver was an undergraduate. He worked ten hours a week in the lab, mostly entering data from the paper surveys some sites still ran, and he had once fixed the knocking radiator for a day by hitting it with a textbook. The night before launch, the Hand had given him admin access to the survey to fix a typo in the Serbian demographics. He had fixed the typo. Then he had added Item 7, and, because it needed to go out in every language and the translators had all gone to bed, he had had a chatbot translate it.

It was the only question in the survey that had not been translated by a person. The Seeker, when he found this out, had all fifty-three versions back-translated by the site translators on their own time. The Allfather put them on the paper. Most of them were already on it twice. That was a hundred and thirty-eight. The back-translations mostly came home as the question the Chaos-Weaver had written. A few did not. In the Danish version, according to the Seeker's table, it asked how many times this week you had asked an AI to agree with you. The Seeker had marked it *meaning not preserved*. The Chaos-Weaver said that it was, if anything, more preserved.

He was not sorry. He found me in the lab kitchen on Friday, while I was waiting for the kettle, and opened a laptop on the counter between the sugar and the hand soap.

"You can't report it," I said.

"I know. I'm not reporting it. I'm showing you."

"I'm not looking," I said, and I didn't, and then I did.

He had run the Hand's pipeline on the full dataset himself, a week before the Hand did, taken out the flagged and the probable, and then plotted Item 7 against the six statements, country by country, fifty-three little panels. People who asked an AI more often whether they were right scored higher on narcissism. Not on admiration. On rivalry. *I want my rivals to fail.* And the slope was the same in every panel. The same in Germany and Denmark and Iraq and Ireland and Nepal and the United States, the same within the margin, the same everywhere, which is the kind of thing you see once in a career, if you're lucky, and then you write a grant.

It was the only thing in the dataset that was about now.

I told him what I would have told a reviewer. It was one question that nobody had approved, translated by a machine, and in Danish it was a different question. And it ran both ways. People who want their rivals to fail might simply ask more often whether they're right.

"Sure," he said. "But look at both. It writes people's answers so they sound modest, and it tells people they're right. Same machine. Same week. That isn't two findings. That's one."

I could see what he meant. It was a very good first sentence. I didn't have a paper to put it in.

"And you know what your other finding is," he said. "You asked forty-five thousand people to describe themselves, and a fifth of them sent someone else. That's your measure. You don't need six statements. You need one column."

It was half right. It was the half that couldn't be published. I said that you can't measure a person by the fact that they weren't there.

"You can if enough of them weren't," he said.

"And the ones in *can't tell*?"

"They're the most interesting," he said. "They might have been there. They might not. Same as everybody."

He had a plan for the Item 7 paper. It would be a separate submission, in the spring, when the review was done, with him as first author. He had drafted an abstract. It used the word *paradigm* twice.

Then he proposed that the chatbots be listed as co-authors on it, since they had, in his phrase, done the fieldwork, and I knew we had come to the end of the useful part.

The Allfather came in for hot water while he was explaining it and listened to the end, pleased, and said, "Put him on," meaning the consortium paper. Then he asked whose laptop it was, and it was the Chaos-Weaver's roommate's, and he said, "And her," and went out with his tea. That was a hundred and forty. It didn't change anything. The Conscience-Keeper's line through Item 7 was in pen.

I closed the laptop for him. He let me.

I remember the slope.

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The Hand ran the three versions on the full dataset the following week, on a Thursday, while it rained. Nothing out, the world was humbler than it had been during the pandemic. Flagged out, it was less humble. With the flagged and probable out, he put the fifty-three country means beside the table the All-Seeing had filed in March, and they were the same table.

Not close. The same. Germany was first. The United States was sixteenth. The Netherlands was 2.31, and the All-Seeing had written 2.31 in March, and the Netherlands was still in the bottom five, which I recorded in the robustness section as evidence that the exclusions had not distorted the rank order.

Since the pandemic, then, in fifty-three countries, nothing we could measure had changed. The chatbots had not made anybody humbler. They had answered for some people, and they had answered humbly.

I put the diffusion report back beside it. What was left of the line was money and nothing else. Ireland dropped back into the pack with everybody else.

"So they did nothing," I said to the All-Seeing.

"Not at that size," he said.

"What about smaller?"

"There's nothing smaller in this," he said. "There's fifty-three countries."

I asked him whether I had changed. I asked it as a joke. I had done the survey myself in the pilot, on the big monitor, and again in the spring, on my phone, after the Hand fixed it.

"I can tell you about fifty-three countries," said the All-Seeing. "I can't tell you about you."

We submitted in November. The journal wanted a contribution statement for every author, one or more roles from a list of fourteen, and the Allfather said that everyone had contributed everything, and the form did not have a box for that. I wrote a hundred and forty statements over the weekend. The custodian in Seoul was *Resources*. The translators were *Writing – review & editing*, twice. I left the Allfather's until last, and when I asked him what to put, he said he hadn't really done anything. I put him down for *Supervision*. He said that was generous.

In December the reviews came back. Reviewer 1 wanted a figure redrawn. Reviewer 2 wrote that the authors' preregistered country means matched the observed means with a precision he had not encountered in twenty-six years of reviewing and did not believe, and suggested, politely, that the preregistration had been written after the data were seen.

I read the review at my desk and then I read it again at the All-Seeing's desk, out loud, while he did something to a covariance matrix.

"He thinks we cheated," I said.

"He thinks the numbers are too good," said the All-Seeing. "They aren't good. They're the same."

"That's what he means."

"Then he's right about the numbers," said the All-Seeing, "and wrong about March."

The editor asked us for the timestamp. The All-Seeing sent the link to the registry, which shows the date a document was

filed and cannot be changed by anyone, and the date was in March, before the first of the fifty-three countries had answered, and the editor forwarded it. The All-Seeing had wanted to add a sentence to the response letter offering to preregister the next replication too, whenever there was one, so Reviewer 2 could watch. The Allfather talked him out of it, kindly, over a date square.

Reviewer 2 wrote back that he was satisfied. He was also, in the same paragraph, requesting a substantially expanded limitations section addressing the possibility of assisted responding, with particular attention to the respondents who could not be classified.

The revision took the month. My renewal committee wrote to say that they were delighted the paper was progressing and had extended me to the thirty-first of January on what they called a bridge. I read the email twice to see if it was from a chatbot. I couldn't tell. I forwarded it to my landlord, who extended me to the thirty-first of January too, at the new rate.

The Allfather wanted to put Reviewer 2 on the paper. The editor said that reviewers are anonymous and that this was the point of them. The Allfather accepted this, and added a line to the acknowledgements instead. *We thank Reviewer 2.* The author list was a hundred and forty, and it was final, and everyone was on it.

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The limitations section was due on a Monday. On the Sunday night I was still in the lab at two in the morning, with the radiator knocking and the door closing behind nobody, and I had written the first sentence four times. The first time it was too long. The second time it was defensive. The third time it was an apology, and the fourth time it was the third time with a semicolon. Everybody else had gone home. The Hand had left the heat on for me, and a note on the printer that said it was out of toner and he would be in at seven.

I asked a chatbot whether we had been right to take the flagged responses out.

It said yes. It agreed completely.

Then I asked it for the paragraph. It wrote it in a few seconds, and it was good. It was clear and careful and modest. It cited the Seeker's report, the three versions, the count of exclusions in every column with the can't-tells included. It noted that the people we had left might not be the people we had asked. And it ended with a sentence the reader could take away.

It said *many*. I changed it to *some*.

Some responses may have been composed with assistance.