ПИРОН Πυρρων АКАДЕМИЧНО ЕЛЕКТРОННО СПИСАНИЕ ЗА КУЛТУРА И ИЗКУСТВА

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Interview from the Series "Science in an Emergency."

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First of all, I would like to thank the Cultural Centre for the unique opportunity it gave us: in dialogue with ourselves we can answer the questions they prepared for us – but we can also answer questions that weren't asked, which I intend to do herein.

I'd like to start with a caveat, which is important for me: whatever I say from now on, I'd like to warn against construing it as a criticism of the measures the Bulgarian government has taken. These measures were fairly similar to those taken in many of the countries around us. Therefore, the way this Bulgarian government has acted is similar to the way previous Bulgarian governments have. We are following an example that is currently our reference point as we have found it suitable for us. In no way could I imagine a Bulgarian government acting like the Swedish one at the moment. Not because of the way Bulgarian governments are, but because of the way Bulgarians are. They wouldn't tolerate such a thing taking place. Sweden is being under monstrous pressure from all sides to act like everyone else, to conform and stop disturbing us by being so different. What they need to resist this kind of thing takes a strong Scandinavian –or Viking – type of nerve.

The type of nerve we don't have. From this perspective, the measures being locally taken can be challenged in their details, but not in their entirety. Thank God we are in a situation where, despite all else, other opinions can be heard. Yet I cannot imagine how we could act otherwise. That's the way it is.

I'd like to make a second caveat, as it is clear that from now on I won't be talking about something only taking place in Bulgaria. Instead, I'll talk about something taking place across the world – and it is unprecedented in many ways—just a few numbers. I don't have a background either in statistics or in virology, which has turned out to be the only licence to speak now – this is part of the situation we live in. So the figures I'll mention are relatively generic. From the beginning of the year until a few minutes ago, when I checked, humanity has grown by nearly 27 million people. That is, after subtracting those who died from the number of newborns. Those who died since the beginning of the year to date amount to nearly 20 million. This is the kind of backdrop against which we are discussing the Covid-19 casualties. Let everyone make their mind about these ratios as they like; I won't dwell on this one.

I will speak as someone involved in literature, in the humanities: it is my business to talk about human society. What do humans look like in this new situation? What do humans

look like against the background of these nearly three thousand years of literary history that I deal with professionally? Since this is the nature of literature, it covers countless other aspects of human existence and the human as such, as a social being, as an emotional being, as a cerebral being – the whole complex set of things we call human. What do humans look like to me in this situation?

The first thing I will say – and we must consider whether this is good or bad – is that modern humans refuse to die. They are reluctant to die in any possible way. The good side, I hope this is a positive side, of this news is that obviously, it would be hard to make such a human to fight a war. In other words, such a human being can hardly be asked to die for a cause, his own or someone else's, whatever causes we might think of. A person unwilling to die might as well be reluctant to fight. But doesn't this have another aspect as well?

On the other hand, we see that human conflicts have not disappeared. Instead of being outlived, the clashes among humans seem to be multiplying. The world's neuralgic points are not on their way out, etc. We don't look overly concerned about the fact that people are dying.

They are dying of other things, they are dying of hunger – and it looks like something we could easily fix. Especially considering that another part of the world is dying of obesity, this is what transpires from the available statistics we all keep track of. So this is the kind of sacrifice, which could be avoided with a modicum of concern. However, we don't look bothered much about it.

From this perspective, this utopia that I am trying to sketch out – featuring humanity that refuses to fight – may have something else lurking behind it. It is that machines will fight instead of us; technology will be increasingly taking over this function to conflict or variance resolution, and we won't have to get our hands dirty with this kind of stuff.

So from this perspective – and we see it in the manifestos of the transhumanists – this is an interesting human being: a being in pursuit of immortality, but, on the other hand, this does not look like a human being particularly concerned about being moral. And I say this in connection with the overplayed moralism that has prevailed in the current situation and has made nearly impossible, or at least too controversial, to argue that we may need to take some risks just as well. At this point, just about the only real shield against the virus that currently threatens us is still our immune system. This is the genuine protection, and everything else is palliative measures: measures which, this is my next topic if solved in isolation, without

taking into account other aspects, can lead in a distant or even not so distant future to more severe consequences.

I am wading here into a question, which we all ask ourselves: is there any change in the attitude of the multitudes represented by social networks? Because just as war will be taken over by machines, so public opinion is being taken over by social networks. So do we see a change? Perhaps, some optimists say, we see a return to the trust in experts. There used to be a battle going on against the authority of science, e.g. to prove that the Earth is flat and that we are being cheated into believing it is round. You know this comedy. Perhaps, at last, the networks that cover the vast majority of humanity have now regained their trust in experts for having realized that science is the only safeguard in this situation.

I am personally sceptical of this. We can see that the experts differ in their opinions, as the situation involves too many factors that do not lend themselves to easy or risk-free estimates. For that same reason, all mathematical models cannot take into account all the elements that have an impact on the situation. Classical tools will have to be resorted to, such as intuition, and also some risk needs to be taken.

Those experts who took the lead due to the difficulty of assessing with certainty what is happening at the moment were those who directly corresponded to the moods of the noisiest majorities and therefore to the basic fears spreading across social networks. These seem to provide the basis of the populist governments prevailing in many parts of the world. So we have to talk now about populist expertise and populism in the expertise. The winners are those experts who say what for some reason dominates the mood on social networks. This is what we see happening right now. Who are these experts who do as I say? They are closely specialized. They belong to a single area, like social networks and their populist governments respect – that is, at the moment, the specific time is always essential given the volatility of these factors – only the opinion coming from a single area: virology in our case.

Here we touch onto the other topic: what happens to other sciences? The ESA was shut down; I don't know if it still is at the moment, but a week or two ago they did shut it down. NASA was largely closed; with only a few of its units staying open. Effectively, there is a risk that projects worth millions will be frozen or even scrapped, as they require the presence of those who work on them.

Talking about space research might be light-years away from virology. Still, today I came across a video that immediately garnered a million visits after it cropped up: it's about

the risk of asteroids passing by. The video is quite prudent: it says that the asteroid now passing by is far enough, just like the previous one that went by. They talk in accurate numbers about the distance from us to the moon and these asteroids. They say that space is chock-full of asteroids, and of course, one of them may one day crash into Earth, as has happened in the past. The video stirred great interest, and this tells us something about another side of the human being. It seems to have lost its curiosity. It is driven by fear.

This might have always been the case, but at least ancient philosophy, the beginnings of philosophy, nurtured the idea is that humans were driven by the thirst for knowledge, by curiosity going beyond these immediate, pragmatic concerns. And that used to be a humanity that led a much riskier life. Up until the mid-19th century, the average life expectancy was about 40 years. But that means it was also a young humanity. And just as the child is a natural scientist – Freud says the child is a researcher, it always wants to know how things work, and is driven by curiosity – so obviously a young humanity, despite all the other catastrophes that constantly caught up with it, felt this urge.

Have we lost that urge? That's what I'm wondering. This is a problem of modern science: once the area covered by science has become so big and wide, with so many unresolved issues – and there are so many of them since all things we have already discovered keep opening up other issues – we end up with this problem on our hands: how to respond to so many open, unresolved issues? Do we have people capable of dealing with them, educated enough, qualified enough? Funding the whole effort is another problem. And it turns out that what channels this funding is fear. In other words, sociologists, lawyers, psychologists, economists, who can say with a relatively high degree of certainty, yes, an economic crisis is imminent (even Marx could tell us the crisis will come periodically), never mind people in more abstract fields – all these sciences cannot scare us enough at the moment. Therefore, we don't care about what they are shouting now. We are scared, and fear dictates our decisions – and decisions taken in fear carry a considerable risk of being wrong. In a situation which, as I said a moment ago, involves many factors, apart from the biological ones, we have reduced everything to a single fear. But humans are social beings; they need communication. And even if we leave these higher needs aside, humans need food. The doctors who treat us will need wages; where will they come from? There will be 8 billion of us in three months. These new beings will need education, but first, they will need to be fed out of starving to death. The new creatures will need food, they will need education, and they will need, yes, health care.

These are the things that should be fundamentally accessible to everyone. Based on what will this be provided, in what way?

How are we helping ourselves out of this situation? I return to Sweden again, thank God we have a point of comparison. Thus we come to the problem that an extremely complex situation has been reduced to the expertise of a very narrow circle – and it is that part of it that accommodates our fear.

Let's imagine, just as an anecdote, that a machine has to resolve a situation where "some people die from a virus" and work its way to a situation where "no one dies from the virus". And if nothing else has been explained to the machine and no other factors have been fed into it, what kind of decision could the machine end up with? That the best practical way to have no one dying from a virus is to have no people at all.