

One remarkable spin-off of the coronavirus assault has not received its proper attention, although it is everywhere and rampant in growth almost as the pandemic itself. What I have in mind is the straightforward mutation in the use of the word ‘We’ by absolutely everybody in the pandemic-related discourse.

In a blink of an eye, that linguistically bonding but historically separating concept, compounding ‘us’ only to denominate ‘them’ and distinguish ours from theirs, became a universal notion, an anthropological ‘Punctum Archimedis’, whatever the language or cultural-ideological orientation of the speaker. If a Martian cocked its ear nowadays to the rhetoric of leaders, media broadcasters and even men and women in the street in different parts of the world, it would definitely conclude that our heavenly body is occupied by a single, exceptionally unified community.

As potential targets or casualties of infection, we have all become equal members of humanity. Also, as potential survivors or warriors in this global battle. *We* shall win or lose. Scientists worldwide are struggling for *Us*: *All* of us – Humans! Yesterday’s rifts between the African refugee and the native Dutchman or Greek citizen as between the Mexican migrant and the US president have all but disappeared. People are once again people; children, old folk, patients, the unemployed, as opposed to brothers, colleagues, friends, loved ones. *Prima facie*! As a matter of our ultimate, ineradicable common denominator – being a part of the human race.

Or so our language tells us.

One may even argue that not only the air, flora and fauna were given, however reluctantly, a chance for cleansing and recovery in light of the mega-drop in the pulse of the civilized ecosystem, but that our very categories of sentient being had been drawn towards a similar process of decontamination.

Or so we can seemingly infer from the way we speak.

This may seem obvious, given that we are exposed and vulnerable to the virus as human animals, regardless of sex, gender, religion or any other mark of civilization, and the right reference group of potential victims, as a virus-proof “smart” city is still to be erected, is indeed all, or at least the vast majority, of humanity. Nevertheless, some non-trivial thoughts do emerge in view of that lingual-mental metamorphosis. It may hold more than an intuitive reading suggests.

Hardly anything can ignite unity in people’s hearts as a great peril. The horrors of war, natural disasters, epidemics (Soviet “Reds” before, Muslim terrorists today) etc., essentially consolidate the communities which face them: *‘we’re all in the same shit and better equipped to deal therewith together’* is a psychological and anthropological truism. Even a family is united by tragedy, still more a nation or a species.

But it isn’t unity or solidarity in the plain sense of those terms that we see here. Even as the virus rages indiscriminately and the infected and deceased continue to soar in number, it is safe to say that few of us as yet changed their basic attitudes to their fellow women and men; to the rest of the group which faces the viral mega-enemy as a single body. We common folk keep following closely

the international statistics and hope that our healthcare systems are better than elsewhere; we hurt for the Italians, but glad we are not them.

And yet, in the pandemic-related discourse and even slightly beyond, we started to use the term 'We' in a broader, effectively universal sense.

The question, therefore, does not have to do with any massive change of hearts, but with our very nature as 'talking' creatures. It has to do with the fact that we humans relate to each other via the infinite riches and essential freedom of conceptual interaction and not merely as objects on a plane governed by a set of rules upon changing circumstances.

Indeed, talking creatures is far from being the same as signaling machines.

The pressing question is therefore the following: What are we to learn from our propensity to stretch and even universalize the lingual-mental solidarity inherent in the very concept of 'We' even as the lack of it is the most distinctive feature of the show, dividing, alienating and setting against each other people of all ages and creeds? What does the possibility of being a *human* community as a matter of our basic lingual-mental disposition tell us about the fact that for the better part of our coexistence we aren't? And most importantly, what are we to answer those who argue that such brute coexistence is natural, namely inevitable, in the realm of the most sophisticated animal that ever walked the earth?

Are we indeed no more than the most sophisticated animals around, superior to the next in line as dolphins are to snails? Or do we differ from the rest of the animal kingdom in that our responsibilities are circumscribed not by our needs or even our rational deliberations, but by the horizons of our conceptual categories?

In strict evolutionary terms 'We' equals '*me and the likes of me*'; like a set of confining circles with me at the center. The lingual application thereof, however, is something completely different. It amounts to *self-reference to something bigger than oneself*. I shall repeat: *self-reference to something bigger than myself*; like an indeterminate plane for its constituents to mold together. The former, true to the selfish gene at its core, commits one to her or his kin; to those who are close and important; to the edges of one's dispositions; ultimately to oneself. The latter does not commit. It liberates. Self-reference to more than myself introduces into my operational system as homo sapiens kinship and solidarity with *the other*; with those who share a privilege, not serve a goal or fulfill a function. Those that can talk, figure out, make an effort. People as such. As part of my particular species I'm part of them all, since neither geography nor any other conceivable difference between any two of us, can undermine the transformative value and limitless potency of such basic, universal, exclusively human faculties. This is the cradle of human responsibility, as opposed to imperatives of our biological background (even if every so often we prefer to call it prudent discretion). This is one being more than, rather than more of, oneself. And it goes back to no moral creed, religious doctrine or spiritual teaching that ever was in any corner of the earth. It goes back to language alone; to the marvelous process of humans learning to speak.

Or could it be that *We*, as a reference to the broadest risk group of Covid-19, has nothing to do with solidarity; that as self-reference in the plural it is totally hollow, contingent, a technicality, a reflection of mere formal fact? I dare say it isn't.

No doubt, saying '*we are enemies*' or '*we despise each other*' is plausible today as it ever was. However, beside the fact that there's really no *we* in those sentences, but only brute differentiation between 'me' and 'you' (unlike the case of '*we are contenders/rivals/adversaries*', for example, in which *we* serve a common civilized goal that is nowhere to be found in the interaction of *enemies* or creatures that *despise* each other), the point is that even enemies in yesterday's discourse become brothers – genuine parts of an actual *We* – if only in the way so many of us relate 'ourselves' under the grim global skies of the Corona; not because of any process of recognition or comprehension, but because of our very human constitution.

If an Israeli and a Palestinian can be *We* at the tip of the Israeli prime-minister's tongue (or the Turk and the Kurd at that of the Turkish president), then all the hostility – doctrinaire or plainly bigot – that such leaders produced in a long career of spiteful rhetoric, is no more than a lie; not (or not primarily) to their respective constituencies, but first and foremost to themselves! To what is human about them, as about us all.

It might help to see that not much has changed since white and black humans in 1950s America had qualified as an authentic *We* in longing with equal parental fervor and piety for Dr. Salk's polio vaccine to save their tormented children, while ready to kill each other over the possibility of the same dying adolescents attending the same university. 'Ready to kill each other' and 'talk ourselves as *We*': what of those two truly represents us as human beings?

One may rightfully observe that such trivial affinity did nothing to avert horrendous discrimination and cruelty, and even sheer monstrosity, among humans in all societies throughout history. Nothing herein disputes that. My only claim is that the human propensity to suddenly apply a sweeping *We* in a public domain that all but vindicates walls of separation and differentiation, is a glowing reminder not only that we can do otherwise, but that exploring that possibility must have been among the goals of whoever or whatever equipped us with that singular skill.

To drive the point home, I would finally ask: would the Iranians accept a vaccine developed in Israel (or vice versa)? I Surely hope there are circumstances in which they would, which makes Israelis and Iranians a fully "Kosher" *We* as well, doesn't it? And what does this tell us about the sworn enmity between our nations, states, governments? Is it as irreversible as we are bound to conclude from what we hear day in day out from smart people on TV?

Hence, the challenge facing the species which was caught in its spoil by this "7.0 on the Richter Scale" pandemic, lies not in fetching a cure or a vaccine. The general frenzy over technological ingenuity and supremacy as keys for solving our species' mess is far from addressing that challenge. Nor does it lie in building virus proof havens, to which we would all rush if only given the chance. Building privileged communities down here or on other planets, only to export thereto the human ills which caused us to seek refuge in the first place, will not help.

A cure or vaccine for corona will sooner or later be crafted and provided to everyone who needs it. Not much will change, though, in the basic human condition as a result. The standard application of 'We' as '*me and the likes of me*' will, other things being equal, persevere, conforming us to those self-centered confining circles. Creativity and power will continue to do miracles in the R&D lab, further enslaving and alienating us in the sea of needless possibilities and collecting their profits to be distributed to a meagre fraction of humans alive. No walls, however, or elusive, user-friendly barriers, or even space and light years, will protect those who think that the finest, strongest and most prosperous can create or hide in a realm which leaves the majority of humankind behind or outside.

No doubt, our roots in the animal kingdom had left us with so much that leads the most advanced social strata, save in a few northern European havens, just there. And the gift of supreme intelligence has all but pushed us to excel, as individuals and groups, in the brute belligerence which lurks behind its compelling form. We are, however, endowed with one other gift, which has been unjustly viewed as merely a tool of that same intelligence. The faculty of conceptual application connects us humans as nothing else does, working not as a tool or a means or even as a common feature (like human DNA). It effectively demonstrates, contrary to widespread paradigms of evolution, that we are not – or can always *become* not – warriors over survival, if only because we can, by definition and whatever the circumstances, *talk, figure out, make an effort*. Lions, scorpions or chimpanzees cannot; in a much deeper sense than they cannot solve quadratic equations.

Language doesn't teach. It demonstrates. It is therefore no less a lens on who we are and what we can be than any intellectual insight or moral standpoint. What it projects to us in these unusually precarious times with utmost transparency is our profound liaison as a community of humankind. Not as a body or an organism on the defensive, but as a *We*. As our distinctive human nature. Will we continue to disregard?