



## Chapter VIII - 6

*Mountains are beautiful. They stand tall before the sky, in every season, every weather, every hour. They are green, brown, white, cloaked in the finest and coarsest materials ever produced. For the many mortal creatures that abide in the surroundings, mountains are also a shelter, a danger, a mystery. They simply are. Yet, none of these creatures has lived long enough to appreciate the sweet, romantic character of their volatility. The evocative, spellbinding view of their emergence from the home soil, with their formation, their glorification... their erosion. Just like their newborns return to dust after death, slowly also mountains will bend, and fall, and lay to rest, under the ground that gave them birth. Until that moment, on ageless scales of space and time, they share the stage with their guests in a silent bond. Sometimes, in the harshest winters, adventurous creatures challenge their snow-clad hosts seeking for food, escapes, or mere adrenaline. Eventually, what outlives all their stories is the hard lesson they bequeath. They all know mountains are strewn with crevices, and that running into one can cost their life. That is why, while roaming through the gelid temperatures, they strive the most to avoid them. Yet, for any creature that fails this challenge, its species learns a lesson from the host: that more dangerous than a steep, deadly crevice is one that lies hidden under a beautiful blanket of soft, shining snow.*

The coast was bending softly on the right, as you approach apace the next cove. There, dark shapes of treetops dominate the coastline, while the view of the stars above heavily captures your attention. Ujana's words resound in your mind like a melancholic symphony, leaving you speechless and disoriented, beaten by a truth you could barely grasp. The desire to investigate was high, but you learned that lesson and simply let it go. Better to ask about something different.

"I'm glad you understood it, finally" – you confess with a caring smile – "What about your teacher instead?"

"What about my teacher?" – he replies absent-minded.

"About the advice she gives you."

"Ah, right, I was not... anyway, well... before it made sense to me, but now that you say that science is not always true... now I'm not sure anymore" – he adds disappointed – "Do you understand what she wanted to say?"

"Yes, I think so. Shall we talk a little more about it, until we get to that cliff, or shall we pause it here?" – you ask, trying to bring his attention back to the lighthouse.

"Maybe, thanks... even if there's not much time."

"Oh, don't worry, we have plenty! So, what were we saying about... ah, right, that you should not trust people who explain everything with miracles, right?"

"Yeah" – he laughs generously – "more or less."

"Come on, cut me some slack! I don't have an iron memory anymore. You should have seen me at your age... those are good memories indeed!"

"..." – he smiles, pleased by the anecdote.

"So, what's wrong with that advice U, tell me."

"Me? You had to explain it!"

"Don't you want to say your take on it first?"

"Hmm, fine, what can I say... to me it made sense already: miracles do not exist, superstition is the fruit of our imagination, so it's clear that we have to ignore them. That's what she told me,

right? And now, now you come and confuse me and I don't know what to believe anymore, but that..."

"Hey?"

"What?"

"What if I disagreed with her statement?"

"Disagree? Are you serious, again?"

"Of course! But let me clarify: actually, I'm sure I fully agree with her, I only disagree with the statement you made."

"What?" – he laughs – "Come on! What does it mean that you 'fully agree with her, but you only disagree with the statement'?" – he shouts, jumping playfully with his walking stick while you look at him with a sly smile – "If you agree, you agree: you cannot agree and disagree at the same time."

"..."

"You're making things super confusing on purpose!" – he complains – "Can't you see that I..."

"What?"

"Nothing... Maybe it's just me, I'm tired. So, what do...?"

"Hey, do you know that you're fun when you react like that?"

"That's not fun" – he replies embarrassed.

"OK OK, never mind, back to business. So, my argument is this: take esoterism, superstition, tarot, astrology, all these bizarre beliefs..." – Ujana looks at you surprised – "Yeah there are many more actually, like... ah right, the evergreen alchemy, divination, or anti-vax movements. Also, let's make it clear in the first place: I do believe, with all my heart, that all these things are unfounded and, today, potentially dangerous."

"I don't know what many of these things are but I think I get the point. So, why don't you simply agree with my teacher?"

"Oh, that's the interesting part: I find all these... schools of thought somehow respectful, and do you know why?"

"Astrology? Well, no, I don't really know..."

"Come on, are you sure? Try, you can guess it!"

"No, I cannot, I'm sorry. I don't know most of them and the others are simply non-sense to me."

"OK fine, but it's clear actually! Listen. Whatever we consider nonsensical today, in the past was at the vanguard of knowledge.

Kabbalah, zodiac signs, potions, herbal medicine: everything was studied and passed on as the state of the art for the description of the world. At least, that's what our predecessors believed based on their tools and knowledge" – you pause – "See what I mean?"

"..." – Ujana shakes his head.

"All right, let's make another example" – you continue – "Have you ever heard about black holes?"

"I think you are going crazy..."

"Oh, come on, follow me for just one minute! Don't you want to learn more?"

"No no, I'm following you, I really want to... I only don't see where you're going. Can you make it clearer, please?"

"Yeah, OK, fine, just follow this example: have you ever heard about black holes in your life, anywhere?"

"No. I've seen many big holes in the countryside... but I suppose this is not what you wanted to say."

"Hehe, of course not. Seriously, have you never heard about it? I mean, they're everywhere, movies, television, books..."

"I don't know what you're talking about, I'm sorry."

"OK, never mind. I just wanted to say that, in the past, great people came to conclusions that today appear unreasonable to us. In other words" – you continue – "science, like technology, is a process that never stops, and we're still progressing every day. Is that clearer now?"

"So what we believe now... in the future can be wrong?"

"Yes! Exactly. So why should we make fun of these eccentric cults, when our grandchildren will look back at us and, likely, think the same of our beliefs?"

"..."

"Look: our most advanced theories on the universe could sound like fairy tales for our descendants. That's why I believe that all those disciplines should deserve some more respect... as an ancient, primitive attempt to unravel reality."

"..."

"For instance, you know what makes me crazy?" – you insist – "I can't tolerate all the people who make fun of conspirators, when they're the first who have no clue about why things work

the way they do. Take flat-earthers, for example: they are crazy and unjustifiable, but..."

"Wait... flat...earthers? Is it a type of farmer?"

"Oh, right!" – you laugh – "A flat-earther is someone who believes that our planet is not a sphere but... well, a huge disk."

"A disk? Flat as a disk?"

"Exactly... which is simply unbelievable with modern-day technology, and still they try to discredit all the efforts and achievements of the scientific community."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah! Just think about all the photos and videos of the moon landing, or all the scientists who worked on these missions: for flat-earthers, everything is a huge lie designed on a global scale to control us."

"Seriously, is it true about moon landing?"

"Yes, it's true and there's more, but I think you got the point: they spread this untruth organizing seminars, writing articles and much more... and you should see how many people follow them, either for their charisma or just to go against establishments."

"Why against?"

"For no real reason. Many follow whatever thing opposes the authority: it's a need they have - like we all have - and we must face the consequences."

"Which authority?"

"It depends: governments, scientists, journalists, whoever holds the power. By opposing them, they unconsciously find a way to affirm themselves: sad but understandable from a human perspective."

"Hmm... I've never seen them but they must be curious" – says Ujana – "Anyway, is there anything bad if they want to refuse the authorities? Isn't it their own life, after all?"

"No, there's nothing bad indeed, as long as they keep it for themselves or the misconception doesn't spread enough to be an obstacle for progress. It's fun though: in order to spread their beliefs, they use technologies developed by the same scientists they oppose. You see how close-minded that can be."

"But don't they see that?"

“No, they don’t...” – you reply – “They need to oppose the establishment and they don’t mind being blind, they’re not even aware of it. Unfortunately, there is also someone who makes money out of this, creating lies to take advantage of people’s fragility... liars always existed, and they always will.”

“I see, but it sounds crazy that these people exist.”

“It is crazy. Somehow reasonable in a sense, but crazy. To answer your question: there’s nothing bad if people like flat-earthers exist, as long as other liars don’t exploit them for money. In the end, besides the propaganda, they’re mostly damaging themselves. Much different is the story of anti-vax movements, where their decisions affect all society... but this is another story, let’s not even go there.”

“OK OK, I see. So, what was the point?”

“Right, so, what I wanted to say is that all those other ‘reasonable’ people, who like throwing judgements from the height of their knowledge, have no clue how to prove that the Earth is indeed a huge ball. Most of them would tell you ‘but it’s clear, come on, just look at the sun that rotates around the planet’, which is meaningless, because I can explain it as well from the viewpoint of a flat Earth.”

“Ah...”

“The vast majority of people blindly believes in what (they think) science tells them, with no critical spirit and no awareness. Take Aristotle, whose followers believed in improbable things for so many centuries, just because they didn’t question him. Even better, take Galileo, who opposed the authority and, for this reason, was subjected to a harsh trial.”

“...”

“Good conspirators, in my opinion, are those who pose questions and seek answers... which, in a sense, is exactly what science does. Although their conclusions are embarrassingly unreasonable, I find their flaws much more acceptable than those who never questioned anything in the first place.”

“But what those people say is... wrong.”

“Conspirators? Yes, of course it is... but that’s exactly what other people thought about the great revolutionaries that today

we study at school. Would you like to be one of those opponents, making fun of brilliant geniuses?”

“No I would not, but...”

“...but I believe we should respect the critical spirit of free people. As long as this doesn’t harm anyone, of course, or puts anyone in danger, like the anti-vax.”

“What would you do with them?”

“If someone puts forth a theory that, according to general knowledge, is utterly mistaken or harmful? Well... in some way, I would oppose it, for the sake of stability in our society.”

“Really? But you just said that I should respect them and now, only because (in your opinion) there is a potential danger, you would suppress it? Are you serious?”

“Yeah, I see your point but this is actually common in society, if not necessary, to ensure safe living conditions: we all make compromises and sacrifices so that as many people as possible are happy. I’d say this is the very essence of society.”

“You mean?”

“I mean that one’s initiatives should be restricted if they undermine the overall structure of society. Take vaccines for instance, which is again a perfect example. By the way, you know how they work and the debate they cause, right?”

“Not sure, anyway what’s wrong with them?”

“That people are skeptical because, in their opinion, vaccines can cause serious and irreversible illnesses, so they choose to go against the experts and to not vaccinate their children. Which has consequences not only for their children but, as you know, for the whole society.”

“OK, but again, the point is...?”

“The point is that they can’t prove that vaccines are dangerous and, for this reason, they’re insulted and attacked... which would be fine, if not for the manners that someone uses but... whatever. The other issue is that, as you can now guess...”

“...other people cannot prove the opposite either?”

“Yep. While we can’t prove that vaccines do not cause illnesses, in principle someday these unreasonable anti-vax can prove the opposite: that we were wrong.”

“ ... ”

“So what if, suddenly, all the overwhelming majority of people supporting vaccines realized that they were mistaken? The very same people that till yesterday had made fun of these anti-vax...”

“That would be terrible” – says Ujana, shocked.

“Without any doubt, and I don’t think it will ever happen... but you never know! You see: the reason why we should vaccinate is that we have no better alternatives, or, more simply, ‘because scientists say so’. They spend their whole lives studying this only one subject, and what we should do is simply trust them. After all, scientists trust bakers for bread, tailors for clothes and so on... why wouldn’t we do the same with scientists!”

“Because people are stupid?”

“I would say ignorant and presumptuous... but yes, it doesn’t change the outcome.”

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“So, do you see now why I disagree?” – you smile.

“Maybe. I should not listen to people who trust miracles and other things because they’re an end in themselves, but...”

“But...?”

“... but I must anyway respect them, because they are the... how can I say... the heritage of some ancient attempts to understand and control the world?”

“Yes, why not, sounds cool. I would also add ‘because this spirit is the same that led us where we are today, to science’.”

“OK, maybe I see... but it’s strange to think that their attitude, which is bad, led to science, which is good. No?”

“Well” – you reply with a serious intonation – “here there is no good nor bad, only something that works and something that doesn’t, according to the majority of people today.”

“...” – he keeps listening engaged.

“Before science was developed, people resorted to mystical explanations to describe the world, which is natural and even commendable. It’s only thanks to their efforts if one day science



was born: without their attempts, no one would have gotten close to discover it.”

“ ... ”

“And science still makes progress every year, and what today is considered true tomorrow could be disproved in favor of a better explanation. This is why we should not think about a scientific theory as something conclusive: science continuously changes and improves in a dynamic way. The only constant is the scientific method” – you care to emphasize – “with its interplay between theory (to formulate a hypothesis) and experiments (to test it). Can you imagine how beautiful it is...”

“... to see something improve?” – he continues, enthralled.

“Yes, that’s true, and also to imagine the whole process: where we come from, where we are now and what more powerful approaches we can discover in the future.”

“So, what is good of these people today who don’t appreciate, or trust, scientific results?” – he asks confused, waking you up from your awe – “I didn’t understand if you are talking about them or about the ancients.

“Both” – you answer sharply – “What’s good is the critical spirit that drives them to describe the world, whether it is through miracles or through technique. The issue is that these people are often not critical at all, and only want to go against the system and progress. That’s the part that, I hope, will disappear soon.”

“But for all the others, even if they believe in miracles, as long as they’re critic and consider the achievements and opinions of all scientists... that’s OK for you.”

“Yes, I would say so.”

“I would say so too, sounds fair!”

“Glad you agree, and sorry if it was so long. I could go straight to the point but - you see - I get very involved.”

“Yeah, I saw it” – he laughs – “but it’s good that you care! And I really like listening to your stories.”

“I’m happy you liked it.”

“She would be happy too, I’m sure!” – adds the child, looking far at the horizon.

“Who?”

“My teacher! Aren’t we talking about her?”

“Ah, sure, I was only... yes, I’m sure she would relate to it!”

“Do you think she knows what you told me about vaccines and superstition? She never said anything about it...”

“Oh, of course she knows! And I’m sure we would agree on everything. That’s exactly what I meant with ‘I don’t agree with the statement, but I...’”

“Ah, now I see what you mean! So cool... and you thought about all that in one second, how could you do it? You are a magician!”

“Hey, come on... stop kidding!”

“That’s true, you are! How can you explain things so clear and fun? That’s not normal... You should see my other teachers; you would run away embarrassed!”

“Yeah, happens sometimes. I also had a lot of bad teachers for many years and only a few real mentors, who still inspire me after all this time. But you know” – you add – “we’re not made all in the same way.”

“I know I know, but some are really stupid. How did you say? Ignorant and presumptuous... yeah, it’s the same.”

“Yep, that’s bad. Despite the latest discoveries, they somehow stick to weird misconceptions of the past. Truly unbelievable, the power of human mind.”

“True... but why don’t people try to imitate other intelligent people, when they are better? OK, they’re not ingenious but come on, it’s so logical what you need to do!”

“Yes, crazy that many refuse to see that they’re doing wrong. I don’t know if it’s for a form of rebellion (kind of: ‘since I don’t have the ability to stand out, I oppose their success’) or because they don’t use logic, it’s a mystery to me... However, – you continue – I wouldn’t say that some people are *better*. After all, not everyone should become a scientist.”

“OK, right... but it’s always better to be intelligent... so why don’t people do their best to improve?”

“To ‘be intelligent’ sounds weird... anyway, I don’t know the answer. Apparently, some don’t even care to look smart, erudite

or well-informed: just think about most VIPs in the media, who only care about their look and their likes, without substance.”

“Media?”

“Media, yes. How do you say, ‘news?’”

“News.”

“Fine, news, anyway...”

“... but this is non-sense, isn’t it? I really don’t understand it” – objects Ujana – “and how can you live so fine with it? I mean, if we are the most powerful among all animals, it’s only thanks to science that made us more intelligent. Why people don’t do their best to become more intelligent?”

“Wait, calm down... Did you hear what you just said?”

“What? Aren’t we the most advanced animals?”

“Gosh, you’re serious!” – you smile – “How can you say that? I mean, think about it a second... advanced with respect to what?”

“Why not? We build houses, schools, bridges, churches, isn’t it enough to say that we are better?”

“Of course no!”

“Why! I’m not saying I don’t respect them or I don’t like them. I love animals! I only say that we are more... developed in some way, no?”

“Again, no! Maybe if you talk about technology, then we seem be more advanced... although I wouldn’t know how to quantify it. After all, spiders, bees and many other creatures can craft amazing things, and that’s everything they need to live well and proliferate. We, instead, build some many things to survive and we’re still the most fragile living beings on the planet!

“...”

“It was just more successful for us to abandon strength and resistance in favor of intellect. Still, shut down electricity for a week and we are all... well, you understand.”

“So, if you agree, what was wrong with what I said?”

“Kind of... everything?” – you smile.

“...”

“OK, listen. First, you say that we are more advanced thanks to technology, which is a concept that humans have invented. Actually, some primitive forms of technology exist also in nature:

just think again about spiders, bees, ants and many more. The point is that, in this competition, we judge our level according to what is relevant for us... right?"

"Maybe... but building a farm is much more complicated than building a hive, or a web... so I don't see your point."

"OK, fine. Would you be able to build a hive?"

"Me? Of course not, I even don't know how a hive looks like inside. Why did you ask this question?"

"Nothing, just follow me. Do you know anyone who can?"

"No" – replies Ujana – "I don't know anyone who builds hives, I even don't have any idea where to start from. I think it's impossible to build one, isn't it?"

"Maybe yes, it's practically impossible. I have no idea either, I don't know how to build one and what one needs... but you see, that's exactly my point. I wanted to show you that animals, even the smallest, can do things that we humans cannot."

"..."

"I hope this can make you think twice when you say that we are more advanced. Even simply for technology."

"Fine, so how would *you* say it?" – he asks defiantly.

"Well, honestly I don't know now. As I said, we don't have a good way to quantify it... still, I see what you mean: we have a better understanding of reality, and we know how to use it to build complex things. I think this is undeniable and everyone would agree on it."

"So, you knew how to say it, don't you? I liked it!" – he shouts enthusiastically, surprised by the description.

"Yeah... well, it's far from ideal but I see that it sounds more precise and fair than what we said before."

"And it's only thanks to science!" – he continues, agitating the wooden stick in sign of triumph.

"What is only thanks to...?"

"That we can do what we do, of course!"

"You know, I wouldn't be so sure" – you reply, freezing his enthusiasm – "Science was born yesterday if you think about our history, but we've been 'more advanced' than animals for ages: we learnt to fabricate tools and houses, to control fire, to cultivate

lands, to domesticate horses... all long ago. So... no, it's not only that... just like it's not thanks to science that we're intelligent, as you say. It's science that exists because we are... we were intelligent. It helped increase this gap though, that is true."

"So we have science because we are more intelligent, as I said, right?" – he asks, positively puzzled.

"Yes, because we are intelligent, that's clear."

"So it's better to be intelligent! Now you agree too, at last!"

"No, of course not. Are you sure of what you're saying?"

"What... you are not? What's wrong now?"

"Well, first I don't understand it when you say that people should become more intelligent. Are you saying that intelligence can be gained with time?"

"Yes! Studying, reading, this kind of things, nothing special."

"But that's not intelligence, that's knowledge!"

"Knowledge? Hmm... so when teachers tell us that we're very intelligent when we take good marks, is also that not true?"

"That is true, but you're not intelligent because you know many things and take good marks: instead, you take good marks because you studied and, usually, you study and understand because you are smart... but getting good marks alone doesn't mean you're a genius. See what I mean?"

"Hmm... That I can take a good mark even if I'm stupid but I studied a lot, so much that I memorized everything, even without... understanding?"

"Right."

"..." – Ujana looks at you surprised.

"For instance, take a smart person with a bad memory: most of what they study will be forgotten in a few days. How well will they perform during an exam? Also, just think about a computer: it can practically solve everything at the speed of light, since we taught it how and since it has an infinite memory... but in itself it's just a very complicated, expensive piece of metal."

"Uh, I've never seen a computer" – he replies out of the blue – "what is it?"

"What? Come on, are you serious? A computer!"

"Yes, why? Is it strange that I've never seen one?"

“Well, in big cities all...most everyone has one at home” – you wonder how poor he had to be – “but there’s nothing bad if you don’t. I didn’t have it either when I was your age, it’s fine. Soon you’ll see one and, if you like it, you can get it!”

“Is it so cool?”

“Very cool! So cool that people like me spend all their days in front of it, days and nights, can you imagine? And it can do everything, especially when you have internet.”

“Do you really spend the whole day in front of a computer? And what do you do with it, you sit and look at it the whole time?”

“Yes, why not?”

“I don’t know, sounds strange to me. Don’t you go out to meet people, or to work?”

“I work with it! Well... in a sense I also meet people with it.”

“So you work with it, you meet people with it, but it’s not a friend: it’s an object, right? And you do everything with it, all day, wow” – says Ujana, amazed – “You know, sometimes I work with a plow and also that is not intelligent, but I can’t use it for anything else, let alone to meet people...”

“Exactly. They’re very different but, in a sense, they are stupid in the same way. The difference is that a computer looks super smart at first sight, but when you look more closely it’s not.”

“How close do you have to look?”

“Look close, U! It’s just a common saying: if you look close, deep inside, you’ll see that it’s not intelligent at all.”

“Ah, I see. So, we are lucky to be truly intelligent!”

“Hehe, right” – you laugh – “we’re all intelligent, someone more someone less, and we all can do things that today machines can’t do. Maybe one day they’ll reach our level but, till then, we have something special.”

“Really?” – he objects upset – “But machines are like animals: they can do things that we can’t do... so why would we be more intelligent than machines and not better than animals?”

“Good point. The problem is that we don’t have a clear intuition of what intelligence is. Actually, it may sound strange but we absolutely have no idea how to define it.”

“Why not? To me it’s very simple: we are more intelligent than a horse, which is more intelligent than a chicken, which is more...”

“Yes U, yes, but that’s not enough. Actually, it doesn’t bring us anywhere. You just listed a few comparisons according to something (the intelligence) that we have not defined. Do you see the problem with this reasoning? It is as if I told you that I’m... hmm... fueler than you.”

“I don’t know what that means, sorry.”

“Of course, I just invented it. See what I mean? I can’t tell you that I’m ‘fueler’ if we don’t agree on what it means. In the same way, you can’t tell me that a horse is more intelligent than a chicken if we don’t decide what it means to be intelligent.”

“But it’s clear what it means to be intelligent!”

“I’m not so sure... would you like to describe it to me, with your own words?”

“Uh, OK... so... intelligent is, for example, a student who’s very good at school, or a scientist that discovers new theorems, or a very famous writer, or...”

“U...?”

“What?”

“You’re describing to me examples of people who, for you, are intelligent. Very intelligent. Fine. But you’re not describing what intelligence actually is.”

“...”

“OK, let’s say” – you set him on a better path – “let’s say that intelligence is the attribute, or the ability to...”

“Hmm, OK... it’s the ability to... the ability to... intelligence is the ability to solve tasks, efficiently and in a smart way?” – says he with a powerful voice, before stumbling on his own words – “Hmm, no, that would be like saying ‘in an intelligent way’, but we said we don’t know what it is...”

“Correct.”

“Fine... so... intelligence is... intelligence is...” – he mumbles – “it’s the ability to solve tasks, fast and well.”

“OK, ‘fast and well’ you say...” – you put emphasis on his last words – “So, a gazelle that runs away from a lion would be very intelligent, right?”

“Oh no, of course not, that’s not what I meant.”

“But it fits perfectly your definition.”

“ ... ”

“Also, would that gazelle be smarter than a musician who plays Mozart in a theatre, in front of hundreds of people?”

“I don’t know, it makes no sense to compare them.”

“But it should be possible to compare them once you give a definition. Even better: is a rolling stone intelligent when it falls fast down the mountain and smoothly reaches the ground?”

“But these examples don’t make any sense!”

“Yet, it still fits your description... beautifully, I would say!”

“OK I understood it, ‘fast and well’ is not a good description.”

“No.”

“And I can’t use ‘knowledge’, you say.”

“Well, you could but not as you did in your example.”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“I don’t know.”

“Of course you don’t. No one does, unfortunately” – you add, with sincere regret – “By the way, one day you should read some awesome works by great philosophers and thinkers, you would find them very interesting.”

“Cool! Do they know the answer?”

“What answer?”

“To your question, how to define intelligence.”

“Oh no, no, I don’t think so. I don’t think they ever found an answer to this open problem, but for sure they made tremendous steps ahead: these books are mind-blowing.”

“But how is it possible that no one knows how to describe it? Come on, we create bridges, ships, castles... and we don’t have an explanation for that?”

“That’s how it is: sorry for bringing bad news. Plus, we have no way to compare it, to take two people and say ‘Look, she’s more intelligent than...’, or ‘they are more intelligent than a cat.’”

“I’m... shocked. Is this really true?”



“I’m not trying to convince you: you came to this conclusion by trying it yourself. I just said that no one really knows how our mind works and, in general, how to measure intelligence. We use this word every day because it’s practical, but no one knows what it means... or actually, ‘it doesn’t mean’.”

“This is incredible!”

“It is, indeed.”

“But you convinced me, I understand now: it’s impossible to say that something is more intelligent than something else, as I said... It’s impossible to compare two people, two animals, a person and an animal... or two things that we can’t see, since we cannot agree on what they mean.

“U...?”

“Hmm, yes, what now?”

“Your last sentence.”

“It’s impossible to compare two things that we cannot...”

“Yes, that one.”

“Don’t you agree?”

“Well, that’s exactly what science does.”

8

The distant cliff approached fast while the area was getting darker, so much that you could see only a few meters around you. Beyond, a thick darkness was veiling the vegetation, discouraging everyone from leaving the water. Above, the moon was shining high in the sky, framed in a soft halo of yellow shades. Since the quiet enthusiasm had taken over the adrenaline, everything has progressively appeared from a more realistic perspective: a dark and desolate land, lost in an empty land. Even the waves, which had made a good company along your journey, only seem to be washing away your footsteps, to leave no trace of your passage in this uncontaminated environment.

Close to you, Ujana was walking slowly, once again lost in his thoughts. That was not the first time, indeed, and it lets you focus for a while on what was about to come. It was not possible to see

much ahead due to the trees and the irregular coastline, so there was not much room for planning. Anyway the strategy was clear at that point: walk as fast as possible up to the lighthouse, or the bridge. “The bridge...” Now that you think about it, the bridge does not make things easier at all. “What if we get there, in the dark and the vegetation, and we have no clue if people are actually taking that road? What if we get injured or encounter animals?” Ujana said that it is possible to reach it but “should I trust him again, after all what happened? ...and things will only get worse once they leave the hill: we won’t see them anymore, and we won’t even know if they’re coming or...”

“But why didn’t you like my first sentence?”

“What?”

“I don’t understand it.”

“What don’t you understand?”

“My sentence, when we were talking about intelligence: ‘If we are the most powerful among all animal it’s only thanks to science that made us more intelligent.’ I see that I should’t say that we are the most powerful” – he goes on – “and that it’s not only thanks to science, but do you agree that we are more intelligent? Or we cannot say even that?”

“Oh, right. But really, does it matter so much to you that you’re still thinking about it?”

“Yes. No, I mean, that’s what we study at school, and then you come and tell me that everything I know is wrong. I don’t know what to think now.”

“But I never said that everything you know is wrong! I only shared my opinion, I didn’t want to offend you of course.”

“But you also said that people know those things, and...”

“Scientists maybe, intellectuals, educated people, certainly not all. Ordinary people do not even care about those points, they never think about it. I mean, no offense if they don’t: it’s just that we all have so many things to care about in our everyday life, that we don’t stumble on...”

“... but you also believe that everyone should see it that way...”

“Wait...” – you try to interject.

“...because, however you call it, we all know what it means to be intelligent. We are smarter than animals, otherwise chickens would run away from their cage and sheep would not follow a dog. That’s why we should all do our best to...”

“Hey, what...”

“...to be smart, to study, to open our mind, to be critical with ourselves and everyone else... otherwise we would be just like beasts and that’s not what...”

“Can I?”

“No, wait please” – he replies freaked out – “Whatever it means, we cannot hide ourselves behind it and say ‘uh, but we don’t know what it is, so we have no reason to improve’. My mom always told me that I must do my best to become a good person, to be kind with people and to work hard to have many opportunities, more than she had... so I don’t want to believe that we are all on the same level, people and... whatever, because we are not, I want to be more intelligent than all the others because that’s the best way to be kind and do well in life. If I’m stupid, how can I help people if I cannot even help myself? How can I find a good job and make my mom happy if...”

“Hey...”

“What now?”

“Can I say something?”

“...”

“...”

“...”

“Good... First, please, I’d like to see you smile. I didn’t want to hurt you and I understand what you feel, I can relate to it.”

“But?”

“There’s no ‘but’. If you want, I can explain what I meant when we talked about intelligence, animals, anything. Just please” – you kindly add – “stop crying: there’s really no need now.”

“...”

“All right. So” – you take a long breath – “what I wanted to say is not that we are as intelligent as other animals (whatever this means), or that we cannot talk about it if we don’t know how to

define it. What I wanted to say is that, first, I would be much more cautious, because we don't know how to quantify it."

"..."

"Second, even if there is this ambiguity, I believe like you that, somehow, we're smarter than a duck or a cow, or whatever animal you like. In general, intelligence goes hand in hand with the... complexity of that living being, so, for instance, a person has more potential than a... I don't know... an ant. Even though ants are very, very smart."

"I don't think I'm complicated; I think I'm very simple and easy-going instead."

"Ah, but that's not what I meant! With 'complex' we mean the complexity of its structure, how..." – he looks at you more and more confused – "... OK, let's say how big it is."

"Ah, I see. Then yes, of course we are smarter than an ant."

"Yeah, that's very intuitive, I think! So, if we..."

"Wait, no, how can it be?"

"What?"

"That an ant is so intelligent, as you say, and that it depends on the size. Otherwise, a chicken would be smarter than an ant, which sounds weird, and a horse would be smarter than us. Are you sure you're not a little bit confused?"

"Come on, of course this is not what I wanted to say. I said that, somehow, this depends on the complexity, and the easiest way to explain what I mean was with their size, but clearly it's more complicated than that... and it's not true that 'the bigger, the smarter'. It simply makes no sense, as you say..."

"..."

"..."

"Every time I tell you that I don't like something, you change your mind and say that it's not what you meant. Isn't it true?"

"Of course it's not true" – you reply calmly.

"But that's precisely what you're doing the whole time."

"OK, listen, I didn't want to make a drama out of it. I just wanted to say what I think about some things you said that I didn't like. I even don't remember where we started, but if I knew that you're so sensitive about the topic I..."

“I’m not sensitive.”

“No? Come on, didn’t you see your reaction?”

“Maybe. Anyway, we started because I asked if you agree that we are more intelligent than the other animals. So, what...”

“Ah, yes. OK, my point is... well, it’s not so easy to explain. Maybe we want to start talking about it after that cliff, that one close to the curve, and we rest there a few minutes?”

“I don’t need it. We can stop for you, if you want.”

“OK... no stop, straight to the goal” – you reply with some disappointment – “So, you asked me my take on us being more intelligent... What can I say? I mean, since you ask... I think it’s all due to the evolution.”

“Evolution?” – he turns his eyes to you, skeptical.

“Yes, or natural selection. Did you study it at school?”

“No, I only heard about it. What is this evolution? Is it when someone improves at doing something?”

“Oh no, no” – you smile – “Well, maybe sometimes it’s used also in that sense, but now it’s something different, more precise. Have you ever heard about Darwin?”

“I read his name on the textbook but we haven’t studied it yet. What did he do?”

“Oh, he discovered something very important.” – you sigh – “He basically changed the way we see the world: plants, animals, anything. In a nutshell, he studied the natural process by which only the living beings that fit better their environment survive, and they pass their ability to the offspring.”

“How? I thought animals don’t talk.”

“Hehe, they don’t do like we do at school. They simply try and try and try until, by chance, after a lot of time and trials, the whole species adopts the optimal strategy to survive. It’s a matter of genetics and biology, but if you didn’t study Darwin at school, for sure you didn’t study genes either.”

“We don’t have biology, and I didn’t understand anything you said... especially how this relates to intelligence.”

“I see” – you smile again – “but it’s fine, it’s normal not to see the connection. If you give me some time, I can try to convince you that everything can be explained by natural selection.”

