

1.2.2: The Blind Man and the Elephant

This old story from China or India was made into the poem *The Blind Man and the Elephant* by John Godfrey Saxe⁵. Six blind men find excellent empirical evidence from different parts of the elephant and all come to reasoned inferences that match their observations. Their research is flawless and their conclusions are completely wrong, showing the necessity of including holistic analysis in the scientific process.

Here is the poem in its entirety:

*It was six men of Indostan, to learning much inclined,
who went to see the elephant (Though all of them were blind),
that each by observation, might satisfy his mind.*

*The first approached the elephant, and, happening to fall,
against his broad and sturdy side,
at once began to bawl: "God bless me! but the elephant, is nothing but a wall!"*

*The second feeling of the tusk, cried: "Ho! what have we here,
so very round and smooth and sharp? To me tis mighty clear,
this wonder of an elephant, is very like a spear!"*

*The third approached the animal, and, happening to take,
the squirming trunk within his hands, "I see," quoth he,
the elephant is very like a snake!"*

*The fourth reached out his eager hand, and felt about the knee:
"What most this wondrous beast is like, is mighty plain," quoth he;
"Tis clear enough the elephant is very like a tree."*

*The fifth, who chanced to touch the ear, Said; "E'en the blindest man
can tell what this resembles most; Deny the fact who can,
This marvel of an elephant, is very like a fan!"*

*The sixth no sooner had begun, about the beast to grope,
than, seizing on the swinging tail, that fell within his scope,*

"I see," quoth he, "the elephant is very like a rope!"

*And so these men of Indostan, disputed loud and long,
each in his own opinion, exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right, and all were in the wrong!*

*So, oft in theologic wars, the disputants, I ween,
tread on in utter ignorance, of what each other mean,
and prate about the elephant, not one of them has seen!*

-John Godfrey Saxe

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