

**The Blind Men and the Elephant, by John Godfrey Saxe, is a metaphor for how we treat our incomplete understanding of complex systems. Having limited information, we draw conclusions and argue extensively for our “opinions.” The poet was a native Vermonter, born in Highgate, in 1816, who attended Middlebury College. Early on, he practiced law in St. Albans, northwestern VT, near Canada. Then, by 1850, he focused more on literature, publishing, and the lecture circuit**

THE BLIND MEN AND THE  
ELEPHANT.

A HINDOO FABLE.

I.

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.

II.

The First approached the Elephant,  
And happened to fall  
Against his broad and sturdy side,  
And began to brawl;  
“God bless me! But the Elephant  
Is very like a wall!”

III.

The Second feeling of the Tusk,  
Cried, “Ho! What have we here  
So very round and smooth and sharp?  
To me it might be clear  
This wonder of an Elephant  
Is very like a spear!”

IV.

The Third approached the animal,  
And happened to take  
The squirming trunk within his hands,  
Thus boldly up and spake:  
“I see quoth he, “the Elephant  
Is very like a snake!”

V.

The Fourth reached out his eager hand,  
And felt upon the knee.  
“What this wondrous beast is like  
Is mighty plain,” quoth he;  
“’T is clearly enough the Elephant  
Is very like a tree!”

VI.

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!”

VII.

The Sixth no sooner had begun  
About the beast to grope,  
Than sizing up the swinging tail  
That fell within his scope,  
I see quoth he, “the Elephant  
Is very like a rope!”

VIII.

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!

MORAL.

So oft in theologic wars,  
The disputants, I ween,  
Rail on in utter ignorance  
Of what each other mean,  
And prate about and Elephant  
Not one of them has seen!

By John Godfrey Saxe (circa 1850)