

*Beyond Ghor there was a city. All its inhabitants were blind. A king with his entourage arrived nearby; he brought his army and camped in the desert. He had a mighty elephant, which he used in attack and to increase the people's awe.*

*The populace became anxious to learn about the elephant, and some sightless from among this blind community ran like fools to find it. Since they did not know even the form or shape of the elephant, they groped sightlessly, gathering information by touching some part of it. Each thought that he knew something because he could feel a part.*

*When they returned to their fellow-citizens, eager groups clustered around them, anxious, misguidedly, to learn the truth from those who were themselves astray. They asked about the form, the shape, of the elephant, and they listened to all they were told.*

*The man whose hand had reached an ear said, "It is a large, rough thing, wide and broad, like a rug."*

*One who had felt the trunk said: "I have the real facts about it. It is like a straight and hollow pipe, awful and destructive."*

*One who had felt its feet and legs said: "It is mighty and firm, like a pillar."*

*Each had felt one part out of many. Each had perceived it wrongly.*

*Idries Shah, Tales of the Dervishes*

## 1.1 ALTERNATIVE WORLD MODELS

In this book we describe the nature and implications of a particular world view, or world model, that we constructed to understand better the long-term causes and consequences of growth in the world's human population and material production. No single element of this world model is new to human thought. What is new is the synthesis of many isolated, incomplete perceptions into a more complete picture, an attempt to comprehend the whole system rather than just its single parts.

Many world models have been developed in the past. Every person carries in his head a mental model, an abstraction of all his perceptions and experiences in the world, which he uses to guide his decisions about future actions. Two mental models in particular have been shared by so many individuals that they have been the basis for social policy at various times throughout history. For simplicity we shall refer to these models here as the "ecological" and the "technological" images of man.

The ecological world view depicts mankind as an integral part of larger, natural systems, limited by physical laws and a finite earth:

the vital essence in man is the same as that in a gnat, the same as that in an elephant. [Bṛhadaranyaka Upanishad 1. iii. 22]

Elevated as man is above all other animals by his intellectual facilities, food is equally necessary to his support; and if his natural capacity of increase be greater than can be permanently supplied with food from a limited territory, his increase must be constantly retarded by the difficulty of procuring the means of subsistence. [Malthus 1830, p. 45]