

The Problem Definition Fallacy

Nobody asked but ...

Any problem solution algorithm must go through a problem definition stage, but all problem definitions do not lead to an appropriate solution. You cannot solve, but by random luck, a problem that you do not understand. And that blind-hog solution will probably not survive downstream consequences for long.

A good example of what I am talking about appeared on Facebook today. A poster declared that the main problem in the world was that some people were too rich. He further implied that a solution was an ultimate fix-all for the problems of history. Then she implied that the answer was simple — to cap the income of everyone. If there were no excess wealth, there would be no unbalance in power, no bar to equality.

What should the cap be? Who would determine it? When will it take effect; will there be a grandfather clause? Where; will it be worldwide or universal? Why would it work? The poser did not answer any of these questions, although there was much hand-waving. This reminds me of a frequent symptom of addiction — saying a thing will make it come true with no further effort, eg “I am going to quit tomorrow.”

There are two rocky shoals in the passages past problems, and Ockham’s Razor applies to each. 1) The definition of the problem must be precise, neither too much nor too little, and 2) the solution to the problem must be precise, neither too blunt, nor too finicky.

— Kilgore Forelle