

By Edgar Allen Poe. Excerpted from paragraphs 11-25 of Eureka

The genius American poet and writer Edgar Allen Poe shared Lyndon LaRouche's animosity to British philosophical liberalism. This essay is a withering attack on the "gods" of the Enlightenment, from Aristotle to Bacon to John Stuart Mill, and their mind-deadening philosophy. Readers familiar with LaRouche's writings will be struck by Poe's forceful polemic against precisely the same characters whom LaRouche has strived for four decades to expose.

And now, before proceeding to our subject proper, let me beg the reader's attention to an extract or two from a somewhat remarkable letter, which appears to have been found corked in a bottle and floating on the *Mare Tenebrarum*—an ocean well described by the Nubian geographer, Ptolemy Hephestion,<sup>1</sup> but little frequented in modern days unless by the Transcendentalists and some other divers for crotchets. The date of this letter, I confess, surprises me even more particularly than its contents; for it seems to have been written in the year *two* thousand eight hundred and forty-eight. As for the passages I am about to transcribe, they, I fancy, will speak for themselves.

"Do you know, my dear friend," says the writer, addressing, no doubt, a contemporary—"Do you know that it is scarcely more than eight or nine hundred years ago since the metaphysicians first consented to relieve the people of the singular fancy that there exist but two practicable roads to Truth?<sup>2</sup> Believe it if you can! It appears, however, that long, long ago, in the night of Time, there lived a Turkish philosopher called Aries and surnamed Tottle." [Here, possibly, the letter-writer means Aristotle; the best names are wretchedly corrupted in two or three thousand years.] "The fame of this great man depended mainly on his demonstration that sneezing is a natural provision, by means of which overprofound thinkers are enabled to expel superfluous ideas through the nose;<sup>3</sup> but he obtained a scarcely less valuable celebrity as the founder, or at all events as the principal propagator, of what was termed the deductive or à priori philosophy. He started with what he maintained to be axioms, or self-evident truths:---and the now well understood fact that no truths are self-evident, really does not make in the slightest degree against his speculations:---it was sufficient for his purpose that the truths in question were evident at all. From axioms he proceeded, logically, to results. His most illustrious disciples were one Tuclid, a geometrician," [meaning Euclid] "and one Kant, a Dutchman, the originator of that species of Transcendentalism which, with the, change merely of a C for a K, now bears his peculiar name.<sup>4</sup>

"Well, Aries Tottle flourished supreme, until the advent of one Hog [Sir Francis Bacon], surnamed 'the Ettrick shepherd,' who preached an entirely different system, which he called the à posteriori or inductive. His plan referred altogether to sensation. He proceeded by observing, analyzing, and classifying facts-instantiæ, Naturæ, as they were somewhat affectedly called-and arranging them into general laws. In a word, while the mode of Aries rested on *noumena*, that of Hog depended on *phenomena*; and so great was the admiration excited by this latter system that, at its first introduction, Aries fell into general disrepute. Finally, however, he recovered ground, and was permitted to divide the empire of Philosophy with his more modern rival:-the savans contenting themselves with proscribing all other competitors, past, present, and to come; putting an end to all controversy on the topic by the promulgation of a



A Remarkable Letter is an excerpt from Edgar Allen Poe's lengthy essay, *Eureka*, first published in 1848. Dedicated to Alexander von Humboldt, Poe prefaced the essay by saying, "I design to speak of the Physical, Metaphysical and Mathematical—of the Material and Spiritual Universe; of its Essence, its Origin, its Creation, its Present Condition, and its Destiny."

Median law, to the effect that the Aristotelian and Baconian roads are, and of right ought to be, the sole possible avenues to knowledge:—'Baconian,' you must know, my dear friend," adds the letterwriter at this point, "was an adjective invented as equivalent to Hog-ion, while more dignified and euphonious.

"Now I do assure you most positively" proceeds the epistle— "that I represent these matters fairly; and you can easily understand how restrictions so absurd on their very face must have operated, in those days, to retard the progress of true Science, which makes its most important advances—as all History will show—by seemingly

intuitive *leaps*.<sup>5</sup> These ancient ideas confined investigation to crawling; and I need not suggest to you that crawling, among varieties of locomotion, is a very capital thing of its kind;-but because the snail is sure of foot, for this reason must we clip the wings of the eagles? For many centuries, so great was the infatuation, about Hog especially, that a virtual stop was put to all thinking, properly so called. No man dared utter a truth for which he felt himself indebted to his soul alone. It mattered not whether the truth was even demonstrably such; for the dogmatizing philosophers of that epoch regarded only the road by which it professed to have been attained. The end, with them, was a point of no moment, whatever:---'the means!' they vociferated---'let us look at the means!'---and if, on scrutiny of the means, it was found to come neither under the category Hog, nor under the category Aries (which means ram), why then the savans went no farther, but, calling the thinker 'a fool' and branding him a 'theorist,' would never, thenceforward, have any thing to do either with him or with his truths.

"Now, my dear friend," continues the letter-writer, "it cannot be maintained that by the crawling system, exclusively adopted, men would arrive at the maximum amount of truth, even in any long series of ages; for the repression of imagination was an evil not to be counterbalanced even by *absolute* certainty in the snail processes. But their certainty was very far from absolute. The error of our progenitors

was quite analogous with that of the wiseacre who fancies he must necessarily see an object the more distinctly, the more closely he holds it to his eyes. They blinded themselves, too, with the impalpable, titillating Scotch snuff of detail; and thus the boasted facts of the Hog-ites were by no means always facts—a point of little importance but for the assumption that they always were. The vital taint, however, in Baconianism—its most lamentable fount of error-lay in its tendency to throw power and consideration into the hands of merely perceptive men-of those inter-Tritonic minnows, 6 the microscopical savans—the diavers and pedlers of minute *facts*, for the most part in physical science—facts all of which they retailed at the same price on the highway; their value depending, it was supposed, simply upon the fact of their fact, without reference to their applicability or inapplicability in the development of those ultimate and only legitimate facts, called Law.

"Than the persons"—the letter goes on to say—"Than the persons thus suddenly elevated by the Hog-ion philosophy into a station for which they were unfitted-thus transferred from the sculleries into the parlors of Sciencefrom its pantries into its pulpits—than these individuals a more intolerant—a more intolerable set of bigots and tyrants never existed on the face of the earth. Their creed, their text and their sermon were, alike, the one word '*fact*'—but, for the most part, even of this one word, they knew not even the meaning. On those who ventured to disturb their facts with the view of putting them in order and to use, the disciples of Hog had no mercy whatever. All attempts at generalization were met at once by the words 'theoretical,' 'theory,' 'theorist'-all thought, to be brief, was very properly resented as a personal affront to themselves. Cultivating the natural sciences to the exclusion of Metaphysics, the Mathematics, and Logic, many of these Bacon-engendered philosophers-one-idead, one-sided and lame of a leg—were more wretchedly helpless—more miserably ignorant, in view of all the comprehensible objects of knowledge, than the veriest unlettered hind<sup>7</sup> who proves that he knows something at least, in admitting that he knows absolutely nothing.

"Nor had our forefathers any better right to talk about certainty, when pursuing, in blind confidence, the à priori path of axioms, or of the Ram. At innumerable points this path was scarcely as straight as a ram's-horn. The simple truth is, that the Aristotelians erected their castles on a basis far less reliable than air; for no such things as axioms ever existed or can possibly exist at all. This they must have been very blind, indeed, not to see, or at least to suspect; for, even in their own day, many of their long-admitted 'axioms' had been abandoned:--- 'ex nihilo nihil fit,' for example, and a 'thing cannot act where it is not,' and 'there cannot be antipodes,' and 'darkness cannot proceed from light.' These and numerous similar propositions formerly accepted, without hesitation, as axioms, or undeniable truths, were, even at the period of which I speak, seen to be altogether untenable:---how absurd in these people, then, to persist in relying upon a basis, as immutable, whose mutability had become so repeatedly manifest!

"But, even through evidence afforded by themselves against themselves, it is easy to convict these à priori reasoners of the grossest unreason—it is easy to show the futility—the impalpability of their axioms in general. I have now lying before me" it will be observed that we still pro-



Poe shows the equivalence between the deductive method of Aristotle, or Aries Tottle (general axioms are assumed, and particulars are deduced from those assumptions) and the inductive method of Francis Bacon, or Hog (particulars are gathered together and generalised into laws).

ceed with the letter—"I have now lying before me a book printed about a thousand years ago. Pundit assures me that it is decidedly the cleverest ancient work on its topic, which is 'Logic.' The author, who was much esteemed in his day, was one Miller, or Mill; and we find it recorded of him, as a point of some importance, that he rode a mill-horse whom he called Jeremy Bentham:—but let us glance at the volume itself!

"Ah!—'Ability or inability to conceive,' says Mr. Mill very properly, 'is in no case to be received as a criterion of axiomatic truth.' Now, that this is a palpable truism no one in his senses will deny. Not to admit the proposition, is to insinuate a charge of variability in Truth itself, whose very title is a synonym of the Steadfast. If ability to conceive be taken as a criterion of Truth, then a truth to David Hume would very seldom be a truth to Joe;<sup>8</sup> and ninety-nine hundredths of what is undeniable in Heaven would be demonstrable falsity upon Earth. The proposition of Mr. Mill, then, is sustained. I will not grant it to be an axiom; and this merely because I am showing that no axioms exist; but, with a distinction which could not have been cavilled at even by Mr. Mill himself, I am ready to grant that, if an axiom there be, then the proposition of which we speak has the fullest right to be considered an axiom-that no more absolute axiom is—and, consequently, that any subsequent proposition which shall conflict with this one primarily advanced, must be either a falsity in itself—that is to say no axiom—or, if admitted axiomatic, must at once neutralize both itself and its predecessor.

"And now, by the logic of their own propounder, let us proceed to test any one of the axioms propounded. Let us give Mr. Mill the fairest of play. We will bring the point to no ordinary issue. We will select for investigation no commonplace axiom-no axiom of what, not the less preposterously because only impliedly, he terms his secondary class-as if a positive truth by definition could be either more or less positively a truth:-we will select, I say, no axiom of an unquestionability so questionable as is to be found in Euclid. We will not talk, for example, about such propositions as that two straight lines cannot enclose a space, or that the whole is greater than any one of its parts. We will afford the logician every advantage. We will come at once to a proposition which he regards as the acme of the unquestionable—as the quintessence of axiomatic undeniability. Here it is:--- 'Contradictions cannot both be true---that is, cannot coexist in nature.' Here Mr. Mill means, for instance,-and I give the most forcible instance conceivable-that a tree



Poe ridicules the logical-deductive method of John Stuart Mill, Jeremy Bentham and David Hume.

must be either a tree or not a tree—that it cannot be at the same time a tree and not a tree:--all which is quite reasonable of itself and will answer remarkably well as an axiom, until we bring it into collation with an axiom insisted upon a few pages before—in other words—words which I have previously employed—until we test it by the logic of its own propounder. 'A tree,' Mr. Mill asserts, 'must be either a tree or not a tree.' Very well:—and now let me ask him, why. To this little query there is but one response:---I defy any roan living to invent a second. The sole answer is this:-'Because we find it impossible to conceive that a tree can be any thing else than a tree or not a tree.' This, I repeat, is Mr. Mill's sole answer:-he will not pretend to suggest another:---and yet, by his own showing, his answer is clearly no answer at all; for has he not already required us to admit, as an axiom, that ability or inability to conceive is in no case to be taken as a criterion of axiomatic truth? Thus all—absolutely all his argumentation is at sea without a rudder. Let it not be urged that an exception from the general rule is to be made, in cases where the 'impossibility to conceive' is so peculiarly great as when we are called upon to conceive a tree both a tree and not a tree. Let no attempt, I say, be made at urging this sotticism; for, in the first place, there are no degrees of 'impossibility,' and thus no one impossible conception can be *more* peculiarly impossible than another impossible conception:—in the second place, Mr. Mill himself, no doubt after thorough deliberation, has most distinctly, and most rationally, excluded all opportunity for exception, by the emphasis of his proposition, that, in no case, is ability or inability to conceive, to be taken as a criterion of axiomatic truth:---in the third place, even were exceptions admissible at all, it remains to be shown how any exception is admissible here. That a tree can be both a tree and not a tree, is an idea which the angels, or the devils, *may* entertain, and which no doubt many an earthly Bedlamite, or Transcendentalist, does.

"Now I do not quarrel with these ancients," continues the letter-writer, "so much on account of the transparent frivolity of their logic—which, to be plain, was baseless, worthless and fantastic altogether—as on account of their pompous and infatuate proscription of all other roads to Truth than the two narrow and crooked paths—the one of creeping and the other of crawling—to which, in their ignorant perversity, they have dared to confine the Soul—the Soul which loves nothing so well as to soar in those regions of illimitable intuition which are utterly incognizant of 'path.'9

"By the bye, my dear friend, is it not an evidence of the mental slavery entailed upon those bigoted people by their Hogs and Rams, that in spite of the eternal prating of their savans about roads to Truth, none of them fell, even by accident, into what we now so distinctly perceive to be the broadest, the straightest and most available of all mere roads—the great thoroughfare—the majestic highway of the Consistent? Is it not wonderful that they should have failed to deduce from the works of God the vitally momentous consideration that a perfect consistency can be nothing but an absolute truth? How plain—how rapid our progress since the late announcement of this proposition! By its means, investigation has been taken out of the hands of the groundmoles, and given as a duty, rather than as a task, to the true—to the only true thinkers—to the generally-educated men of ardent imagination. These latter—our Keplers—our Laplaces—<sup>10</sup> 'speculate'—'theorize'—these are the terms can you not fancy the shout of scorn with which they would be received by our progenitors, were it possible for them to be looking over my shoulders as I write? The Keplers, I repeat, speculate—theorize—and their theories are merely corrected—reduced—sifted—cleared, little by little, of their chaff of inconsistency—until at length there stands apparent an unencumbered *Consistency*—a consistency which the most stolid admit—because it is a consistency—to be an absolute and an unquestionable Truth.

"I have often thought, my friend, that it must have puzzled these dogmaticians of a thousand years ago, to determine, even, by which of their two boasted roads it is that the cryptographist attains the solution of the more complicate cyphers—or by which of them Champollion guided mankind to those important and innumerable truths which, for so many centuries, have lain entombed amid the phonetical hieroglyphics of Egypt. In especial, would it not have given these bigots some trouble to determine by which of their two roads was reached the most momentous and sublime of all their truths-the truth-the fact of gravitation? Newton deduced it from the laws of Kepler. Kepler admitted that these laws he guessed—these laws whose investigation disclosed to the greatest of British astronomers that principle, the basis of all (existing) physical principle, in going behind which we enter at once the nebulous kingdom of



Left.Jean-François Champollion guided mankind to innumerable truths by deciphering numerous Egyptian hieroglyphics, such as his 1822 translation of the Rosetta Stone hieroglyphs.

Right.After confirming and writing up his third law of planetary motion, Kepler was reported to have written in a letter that, "The die is cast; the book is written, to be read either now or by posterity, I care not which. It may well wait a century for a reader, as God has waited six thousand years for an observer."

Metaphysics.Yes!—these vital laws Kepler guessed—that is to say, he imagined them. Had he been asked to point out either the deductive or inductive route by which he attained them, his reply might have been—'I know nothing about routes—but I do know the machinery of the Universe. Here it is. I grasped it with my soul—I reached it through mere dint of intuition. Alas, poor ignorant old man! Could not any metaphysician have told him that what he called 'intuition' was but the conviction resulting from deductions or inductions of which the processes were so shadowy as to have escaped his consciousness, eluded his reason, or bidden defiance to his capacity of expression? How great a pity it is that some 'moral philosopher' had not enlight-

#### Footnotes

Most of the allusions are discussed in the notes on "Mellonta Tanta" above, but several of Poe's references, different in "A Remarkable Letter," are identified below.

<sup>1</sup>This is intentional confusion: Ptolemy Hephestion (or son of Hephestion), a Greek mythographer (see "Berenice;" n. g) was *not* the Nubian Geographer (see "Eleonora," n. 4). Compare the introductory paragraph of "Mellonta Tanta."

<sup>2</sup> Compare "Mellonta Tanta" at n. 19.

<sup>3</sup>Aristotle, in *Problemata*, xxxiii, 9, said that sneezing comes from the head, the "seat of reason." Compare "Bon-Bon" at n. 19.

 $^{\rm 4}$  Immanuel Kant was ein Deutscher, a German, but not ein Hollander, a Dutchman.

<sup>5</sup>Compare "Mellonta Tanta" at n. 22. Poe's change in wording strengthens his point by making it startlingly clear. On knowledge by intuition see "A Chapter of Suggestions" (*The Opal* for 1845), number 8:"The intuitive and seemingly casual perception by which we often attain knowledge, when reason herself falters and abandons the effort, appears to resemble the sudden glancing at a star, by which we see it more clearly than by a direct gaze; or the Half-closing the eyes in looking at a plot of grass, the more fully to appreciate the intensity of its green." See also "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," n. 30.

<sup>6</sup> Inter-Tritonic minnows are little fishes swimming among Tritons—monstrous denizens of the deep—whose vastness is beyond their comprehension.

<sup>7</sup> Compare Milton, *Comus*, lines 171-173:

"... riot and ill managed merriment

Such as the jocund flute, or gamesome pipe

Stirs up among the base unlettered hinds ..

<sup>8</sup> David Hume (1711-1776) was the great Scottish historian and empiric philosopher; Joseph Hume (1777-1855) was long a radical leader in the House of Commons, and proposed many reforms in Church and State. He was certainly ened him about all this! How it would have comforted him on his death-bed to know that, instead of having gone intuitively and thus unbecomingly, he had, in fact, proceeded decorously and legitimately—that is to say Hog-ishly, or at least Ram-ishly—into the vast halls where lay gleaming, untended, and hitherto untouched by mortal hand—unseen by mortal eye—the imperishable and priceless secrets of the Universe!

"Yes, Kepler was essentially a *theorist*; but this title, *now* of so much sanctity, was, in those ancient days, a designation of supreme contempt. It is only *now* that men begin to appreciate that divine old man—to sympathize with the prophetical and poetical rhapsody of his ever-memorable words. For *my* part," continues the unknown correspondent, "I glow with a sacred fire when I even think of them, and feel that I shall never grow weary of their repetition:—in concluding this

letter, let me have the real pleasure of transcribing them once again:—'I care not whether my work be read now or by posterity. I can afford to wait a century for readers when God himself has waited six thousand years for an observer. I triumph. I have stolen the golden secret of the Egyptians. I will indulge my sacred fury.'''<sup>11</sup>

Here end my quotations from this very unaccountable if not impertinent epistle; and perhaps it would be folly to comment, in any respect, upon the chimerical, not to say revolutionary, fancies of the writer—whoever he is—fancies so radically at war with the well-considered and well-settled opinions of this age.

an eccentric, but noted for his integrity.

<sup>9</sup>See "Mellonta Tanta," n. 27.

<sup>10</sup> The allusion is to Pierre-Simon, Marquis de Laplace (1749-1827), celebrated French astronomer and mathematician.

<sup>11</sup> Poe here had in mind remarks of Johann Kepler (1571-1630), discoverer of the "laws" of planetary motion known by his name and basic to the development of modern astronomy, in a letter written after be had confirmed the validity of his third law. An account of the episode by Sir David Brewster appeared in his small volume *The Martyrs of Science, or, the Lives of Galileo, Tycho Brahe, and Kepler* (London, 1841). In the Harper edition of 1843, p. 217, one reads:

"This law, as he himself informs us, first entered his mind on the 8th of March, 1618; but, having made an erroneous calculation, he was obliged to reject it. He resumed the subject on the 15<sup>th</sup> of May; and, having discovered his former error, he recognised with transport the absolute truth of a principle which for seventeen years had been the object of his incessant labours. The delight which this grand discovery gave him had no bounds. 'Nothing holds me,' says he;'I will indulge in my sacred fury; I will triumph over mankind by the honest confession that I have stolen the golden vases of the Egyptians to build up a tabernacle for my God, far away from the confines of Egypt. If you forgive me I rejoice; if you are angry, I can bear it. The die is cast; the book is written, to be read either now or by posterity, I care not which. It may well wait a century for a reader, as God has waited six thousand years for an observer.'"

One of Brewster's acknowledged sources, John Elliot Drinkwater Bethune's *Life of Kepler* (1830) in the Library of Useful Knowledge, was first cited in connection with Poe by Margaret Alterton in *Origins of Poe's Critical Theory*, pp. 142-143. Poe may have found his material in either Brewster or Bethune, or in another translation, since Kepler's rhapsodic outburst was well known to students of astronomy.

