

Ancient *Topoi* in the Philosophical Literature of the Enlightenment: Voltaire, *Micromégas*, & the View from Above

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Abstract: This essay explores the way that Pierre Hadot's revolutionary work on ancient philosophy as a way of life involving the use of a variety of literary genre to effect different pedagogical and psychagogic ends can be fruitfully applied to the *oeuvres* of the French *philosophes*, with a view to understanding their specific conceptions and practice of philosophy (Part 1). After examining both the elevating and downwards looking ("katasopic") dimensions of the ancient philosophical *topos* of the view from above (Part 2), we use Hadot's analysis of this remarkable ancient figure of thought, including in the satirist Lucian, to read Voltaire's *conte philosophique*, *Micromégas* (Part 3). Using Hadot's analysis, we will show, allows us to recover the elevating dimension of this interstellar fable, sometimes missed by commentators, tying it to Voltaire's post-Lockean, post-skeptical conception of wisdom as a form of learned ignorance. The concluding part (Part 4) considers the significance of this analysis, on one hand, in terms of debates concerning the history of philosophy as a way of life and its modern fates, and the other hand, for debates concerning how to read the texts of the French enlightenment, and understand the conception of philosophy at play in the *philosophes*.

Keywords: Hadot, Voltaire, *Micromégas*, philosophy as a way of life, *philosophes*, Diderot.

1. Introduction: *philosophy as a way of life and the philosophes*

A principal cause of what Catherine Wilson has called the academic "delisting" of the philosophy of the French enlightenment¹ is surely the choice of Voltaire, Diderot, Montesquieu, Rousseau and others to write in a variety of literary

¹ C. Wilson, *The Enlightenment Philosopher as Social Critic*, in «Intellectual History Review», vol. 18, n. 3, p. 417. But see the essays collected in *Voltaire philosophe: regards croisés*, textes réunis par S. Charles, S. Pujol, Ferney-Voltaire: Centre Internationale d'études du XVIIIe siècle, 2017. The author would like to add an especial thank you to Nicolas Cronk for looking over an earlier draft of this paper, and offering his critique and direction.

forms no longer credited as “philosophical” today. Voltaire, Diderot, and other *philosophes* wrote plays, novellas, contes, fables, dictionary and encyclopedia entries, even philosophical poems. The age of enlightenment was nevertheless lauded and feared in its own time, and in the century following, as specifically the “age of philosophy”. It arguably marks the last period of Western intellectual history in which the philosopher could be considered such an eminent, problematic cultural type as to attract a satirical theatre². To understand the divergence between today’s dismissal of the enlightenment (excluding perhaps Rousseau and Kant, both differently eccentric to this philosophical moment) and the 18th and 19th century assessments of the *philosophes* accordingly must involve asking how predominant metaphilosophical conceptions have changed since that time. It requires that we bracket our metaphilosophical expectations for long enough to re-ask how figures like Voltaire and Diderot themselves conceived philosophy, its place in the changing world, and questions surrounding its different modes of literary presentation and their aims³.

In this task, the revolutionary work of Pierre Hadot on ancient philosophy “as a way of life” presents itself as an important interlocutor⁴. For Hadot, the ancient philosophers – including the Roman Stoics on whom Voltaire and the other *lumières* were still raised – had conceived of philosophy as a work of self-transformation as well as theory-formation. We can see this, he argued, on the basis of the texts which they wrote: texts which, as in the French enlightenment, do not reflect our present limitation of philosophical writing to the monograph, edited collection, or journal article. Genres such as the consolation or the epistolary exchange between philosopher and pupil, like that between Seneca and Lucilius, Hadot noted⁵, presuppose an entirely different philosophical culture, in which philosophers were deemed able to do more and different things with words than philosophers today. They were tasked with morally instructing, practically exhorting, psychologically comforting and ethically inspiring, as well as theoretically writing and teaching. Entire swathes of some texts, and entire texts like Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations*⁶, can therefore only be understood as depicting or staging what Hadot famously calls “spiritual exercises”⁷: voluntary practices of reading, writing, meditation and taming the passions undertaken with

² See I. Wade, *The Structure and Form of the French Enlightenment, Volume 1: Esprit Philosophique*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1977, p. 44. According to Wade, there were some 225 plays in enlightenment France featuring a philosopher as a character.

³ See V. Le Ru, «L’autoportrait de Voltaire en *Philosophe Ignorant*», in Voltaire, *Philosophe Ignorant*, Flammarion, Paris 2009, esp. pp. 14-15; S. Van Damme, *A toutes voiles vers la vérité. Une autre histoire de la philosophie au temps des Lumières*, Paris, Seuil, 2014.

⁴ Esp. P. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, trans. M. Chase, Wiley-Blackwell, London 1995; *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, trans. M. Chase, Cambridge, Mass., Belknap 2002; *Selected Essays: Philosophy as Practice*, trans. M. Sharpe & F. Testa, Bloomsbury, London 2020.

⁵ P. Hadot, *Jeux de langage et philosophie*, in *Wittgenstein et les limites du langage*, Vrin, Paris 2004.

⁶ P. Hadot, *Inner Citadel: The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*, trans. M. Chase, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass. London 1998.

⁷ P. Hadot, *Spiritual Exercises*, in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, cit., pp. 81-125.

a view to actively cultivating a changed attitude towards existence, and deeply integrating philosophical principles into an individual's ways of thinking, desiring, and emoting.

Hadot's sensitivity to the different "language games" which philosophers of different periods have played, shaped directly by his early encounter with the later Wittgenstein⁸, suggests a new optic with which to approach the philosophical literature of the French enlightenment. The latter's key protagonists, whether Voltaire, Diderot or D'Holbach, were deeply versed in the ancient philosophies, led by Stoicism and Epicureanism, as well as ancient historiography and poetics⁹. Perhaps, to understand their ways of philosophizing we need then to include them within a history of philosophy awake to its ancient conception as a therapeutic and eudemonistic "art of living", a thought which Hadot himself at least once passingly ventured¹⁰. Voltaire in the *Dictionnaire philosophique* in particular hence could open his entry on "philosopher" by designating this figure in very "ancient" terms; as a «"lover of wisdom", that is, "of truth." All philosophers have possessed this two-fold character; there is not one amongst the philosophers of antiquity who did not give examples of virtue to mankind, and lessons of moral truth»¹¹.

Elsewhere in the *Dictionnaire*, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius are especially praised, alongside Confucius and the Emperor Julian, as «great men who, having taught and practiced the virtues that God requires, seem to be the only persons possessing the right of pronouncing his decrees»¹². It is the lives that they lived, more than for anything they wrote – and as informing those writings – that Voltaire, like Hadot, still sees as preeminently philosophical and worthy of emulation.

In this metaphilosophical light, it becomes possible to reconsider Voltaire's and the other *philosophe's* explorations of multiple literary genres as not any departure from "serious" philosophy. Rather, these experiments represent the exploration of different media to reach different audiences, outside of scholars alone. The plays, novels or *contes* represent vehicles to present new ideals for living and thinking («examples of virtue to humankind, and lessons of moral truth»), as well as to explore and test against experience a host of ideas in meta-

⁸ P. Hadot, *Jeux de langage et philosophie*, in *Wittgenstein et les limites du langage*, cit.; P. Force, *In the Teeth of Time: Pierre Hadot on Meaning and Misunderstanding in the History of Ideas*, in «History and Theory», vol. 50, no. 1 (2011), pp. 20 – 40.

⁹ See esp. M. Mat-Hasquin, *Voltaire et l'Antiquité grecque*, The Voltaire Foundation, Oxford 1981; R. Goulbourne, *Diderot and the Ancients*, in J. Fowler (ed.), *New Essays on Diderot*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2014.

¹⁰ P. Hadot, *My Books and My Researches*, in *Selected Essays: Philosophy as Practice*, trans. M. Sharpe & F. Testa, Bloomsbury, London 2020, p. 40.

¹¹ Voltaire, "Philosophe", *Dictionnaire philosophique II: David-Vertu*, in *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire / Complete works of Voltaire*, Voltaire Foundation, Oxford 1968-, vol. 36, TOUT VOLTAIRE (uchicago.edu).

¹² Voltaire, "Dogmes", in *ivi*.

physics and natural philosophy, like fate in *Jacques le fataliste*, theodicy in *Candide*, or epigenesis in *D'Alembert's Dream*.

More than this, Hadot's framework suggests another possibility. This is that the presentation of different characters and *mises en scène* in the *philosophes'* fictions involve the staging of what Hadot, in his programmatic *Forms of Life and Forms of Discourse in Ancient Philosophy*, calls the «themes of meditations... which have dominated and which still dominate our Western thought»¹³. The textual and epistolary evidence does not support the idea that the *philosophes* systematically practiced and prescribed the spiritual exercises of the ancients, like the premeditation of evils or death. Voltaire, in *Les deux consolés*, expresses a deep skepticism about the ability of philosophical consolation, as against the slow passage of time, to assist those who are grieving¹⁴. Nevertheless, approaching enlightenment texts like Voltaire's *contes philosophiques* through a Hadotian lens allows us to explore how they give literary forms to the «relatively limited number of formulae and metaphors», or, as Hadot also says, *topoi* at play in the ancient spiritual exercises, which «were known during the Renaissance and in the modern world in the very form that they had in the Hellenistic and Roman tradition»¹⁵.

In this paper, we will undertake a close critical reading of Voltaire's extraordinary philosophical tale, *Micromégas*. We will argue that it especially can be understood as a fictional staging of the spiritual exercise which Hadot calls “the view from above”, influenced particularly by a figure Hadot cites in his dedicated essay on this exercise as an ancient literary proponent of it whom Voltaire also admired, Lucian of Samosata¹⁶. The text in this light stages a “view from Sirius”, one which takes in the post-Copernican shifts in astronomy (and the pos- Leeuwenhoekian experiments in microscopy) to argue for a post-Lockean re-conception of human being and our limited place in the infinite universe.

Part 2 of the paper hence examines Hadot's analysis of the view from above exercise, which he traces as a “topic” which cross-cuts the different ancient schools¹⁷. Part 3 applies the terms of Hadot's analysis of this ancient exercise, and what we term its two, downwards-looking and elevating dimensions, to reread Voltaire's *Micromegas*. By doing so, we show, we can to recapture the transformative optimism of the text, missed by commentators unaware of the ancient legacy behind its framing conceit, who hence see the *conte's* depiction of the tiny human creatures addressed by the giants from Sirius and Saturn as wholly pessimistic. Concluding remarks in Part 4 reflect on the significance of

¹³ P. Hadot, *Forms of Life and Forms of Discourse in Ancient Philosophy*, in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, trans. M. Chase, Wiley-Blackwell, London, 1995, p. 68.

¹⁴ Voltaire, *Les Deux Consolés*, in *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire* Garnier, Paris 1877, pp. 123-124.

¹⁵ P. Hadot, *Forms of Life and Forms of Discourse*, cit., p. 68, p. 67.

¹⁶ P. Hadot, *The View from Above*, in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, cit., pp. 238-250.

¹⁷ P. Hadot, *Forms of Life and Forms of Discourse*, cit., p. 68.

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Voltaire's literary refiguring of the ancient-philosophical spiritual exercise of the view from above in *Micromégas*, given recurrent claims that Hadot's conception of philosophy has little purchase in modern thought after Descartes, and showing that he was not alone in the French enlightenment in recurring to this ancient philosophical formula.

2. Pierre Hadot and the view from above

It is notable that Pierre Hadot's consideration of *The View from Above* in *Philosophy as a Way of Life* begins with a modern: the poet Goethe, admirer of Voltaire, and a lifelong interest of Hadot's¹⁸. True poetry, Goethe reflected, is like a spiritual version of those hot air balloons which in his time were enabling human beings to look down at landscapes from what was up to that time taken to be a "bird's" or "gods'-eye" view. Likewise, says Goethe, poetry «lifts us up into the higher regions, along with the ballast that clings to us; from a bird's-eye view, the mad labyrinths of the world spread out before us»¹⁹.

Goethe's exploration of this theme of the "flight of the soul", Hadot claims, is the legatee of a rich ancient philosophical and poetic tradition²⁰. For this tradition, cutting across distinctions between doctrinal schools, it was the metaphorical and existential meaning of adopting, in deliberate meditation, a view looking downwards on human affairs, as against a physical ascent, that was decisive. Standing back from Hadot's text, there are two privileged Hadotian dimensions of the exercise that emerge from his ensuing analysis of a litany of examples of the way this meditative topic was cast and recast within Platonism, Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Cynicism which we will examine in turn. Firstly, there is an "elevating" function in meditatively adopting the view from above. Herein, depending on the ontology in play, the individual is encouraged to adopt the perspective of nature, universality, immortality, eternity, or of God or the gods. Secondly, there is what we can call a "katasopic" (downwards looking) meaning. Herein, achieving the cosmic perspective allows the philosopher to make light of her ordinary experiences, and the affairs of human beings more widely. Let us consider each of these dimensions, in turn, to clearly establish the interpretive bases for our reading of Voltaire's *Micromégas* in Part 2.

¹⁸ See P. Hadot, *N'Oublie pas de vivre: Goethe et la tradition des exercices spirituels*, Vrin, Paris 2008.

¹⁹ P. Hadot, *View from Above*, cit., p. 239.

²⁰ P. Hadot, *View from Above*, cit., pp. 238-240. See also P. Hadot, *N'Oublie pas de vivre*, cit.

2.1. *Elevation*

Hadot specifies that there are in fact two related “concepts” involved in the elevating function of the view from above²¹. The first, as especially in the Platonic tradition, positions philosophy «as a means of achieving spiritual death»²². In Plato’s *Phaedrus*, the soul is depicted as unfurling its wings, once it is disencumbered by death of its body, so that it can rise to the outermost boundaries of the heavenly spheres. Cicero’s *Tusculan Disputations* I and the conclusion of Seneca’s *Consolation to Marcia* likewise depict the soul, freed by death from the body, seeing with its own eyes the hidden secrets of nature²³. Hadot examines how in Plutarch’s *On the Delays of Divine Vengeance*, the freed soul of Thespasius of Soloi rose with death up to a cosmic height, seeing «nothing like what he had seen before: the stars were enormously large and immeasurably far from one another, and they shone forth with a great force and marvelous colors»²⁴.

The second concept under this header then involves philosophy itself as «the ascent of the soul into the celestial heights»²⁵. If in the Platonic tradition, this process is figured as the “cosmic flight of the soul” in the ways we have glimpsed, in the non-dualistic Hellenistic schools the achievement of such an elevated view from above is associated with what Hadot terms “practical physics”. Here again, the soul attains to a universal perspective. But this time, what is at stake is «an exercise in which the imagination speeds through the infinite vastness of the universe» itself, rather than a beholding of the transcendent supercelestial form, as within Platonism. Through attaining this perspective, the philosopher achieves the virtue of *megalopsychia*, greatness of soul. Marcus Aurelius will talk of the soul enlarged by this exercise so as to «traverse the whole universe and the surrounding void», able to survey its entire form, and «reach out into the boundless extent of time, embracing and pondering the rebirth of the all»²⁶. One other significant way in which this expanded view of the world is described, looking back to Homer²⁷, is as the adoption of a god’s-eye perspective. As Hadot comments concerning the Epicurean “cosmic flights”: «the Epicurean sage’s gaze upon infinity probably corresponds to that of the Epicurean gods. Unconcerned about mundane affairs in their bright, eternal tranquility, they spend their time contemplating the infinity of space, time, and the multiple worlds»²⁸.

The particular vision of the cosmos enabled through the exercise varies between the schools. So, in Lucretius, the soul ventures virtually through the infin-

²¹ P. Hadot, *View from Above*, cit., pp. 240-242.

²² Ivi, p. 242.

²³ Ivi, p. 240.

²⁴ Plutarch in ivi, 241.

²⁵ Ivi, p. 242.

²⁶ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, II, 1-2, at 244; cfr. Philo, cited at pp. 243-44.

²⁷ P. Hadot, *View from Above*, cit., p. 238.

²⁸ Ivi, p. 243.

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ity of space and worlds, far beyond “the flaming walls of our world”, born aloft on the premises of Epicurean physics²⁹. In different meditations of Marcus Aurelius, by contrast, the view from above takes a more temporal inflection. Looking at human affairs in the light of the whole enables the philosopher here to see that everything that seemed new and shocking in their experience of people and of their times in fact involve recurring forms and patterns, as well as to grasp vividly the transience of even the greatest human concerns in the cosmic scale³⁰.

2.2 Looking down on human things

The second, “katasopic” aim of the ancient view from above meditative *topos* involves a therapeutic function of cleansing the soul: whether of bodily desires (in Platonism), our evaluative attachments to externals (in Stoicism), or the unnatural needs suggested to us by *kenodoxia* (“empty opinions”, in Epicureanism)³¹. As Hadot introduces this aim, «the view from above can also be directed pitilessly upon mankind’s weaknesses and shortcomings»³². Once the soul has been elevated to the viewpoint of the Ideas or the perspective of the Whole, its sense of the world here below is transformed. In Lucretius’ famous passage, a certain delight may attend this new vision, in which what had formerly seemed all-consuming appears now as small: “nothing is more delightful than to possess well-fortified sanctuaries serene, built up by the teachings of the wise, whence you may look down from on high upon others and behold them all astray, wandering abroad and seeking the paths of life”³³. In Seneca’s *Natural Questions*, another motif emerges which we will see echoed in Voltaire’s *Micromégas*: the sense in which, viewed from a cosmic perspective, the human beings that populate the earth appear as little more than a swarm of ants or insects. In Marcus Aurelius, it is «a mixture of everything, and an order composed of contraries», «diversities of creatures who are being born, coming together, passing away” that can present

²⁹ Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, II, 1044, cited at p. 245 P. Hadot, *View from Above*, cit.

³⁰ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, IV, 32; VIII, 31; X, 27; XI, 1, 2.

³¹ In Stoicism, for instance, the view from above serves to refigure our ordinary attachments as implicating the “indifferents” Stoic theory advises that such “externals” truly are: «You have the power to strip off many superfluous things that are obstacles to you, and that depend entirely upon your value-judgements; you will open up for yourself a vast space by embracing the whole universe in your thoughts, by considering unending eternity», Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, IX, 32 (cited at Hadot, *View from Above*, cit., p. 244). In this way, and in a way which will be important for understanding Voltaire’s play of competing perspectives in *Micromégas*, the view from above is closely allied to other exercises in what he terms the Stoic disciplines of logic (or “assent”) and desire, on which, see P. Hadot, *Inner Citadel*, cit., pp. 101-182. In contrast to our usual modes of perception, these disciplines train the philosopher to reflectively examine all her impressions, learning to attentively distinguish between things as they are in themselves and in the larger cosmic order, independently of what we may wish or fear, as against the ways in which they appear in our passionate, interested assessments of them. See also P. Hadot, *Physics as Spiritual Exercise, or Pessimism and Optimism in Marcus Aurelius*, in *Selected Essays: Philosophy as Practice*, cit., pp. 227-234.

³² P. Hadot, *View from Above*, cit., p. 245.

³³ Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, II, 7, cited in *ivi*, at p. 245.

itself to a gaze from above³⁴: “herds, armies, farms, weddings, divorces, births, deaths, the noise of law courts, lonely places, various foreign nations, festivals, mourning, marketplaces”³⁵.

Intriguingly, however, with one eye forwards again to Voltaire’s text (Part 3), Hadot above all identifies this downwards-looking function of the view from above with the Cynic tradition. The Cynics were called in antiquity *kataskopoi*, spies or more literally, “down-lookers”³⁶. Hadot indeed focuses upon the satirist Lucian’s text *Icaromenippus, or the Spy-Man* to draw out the Cynics’ use of this philosophical exercise³⁷. Notably for us, this is exactly the ancient text that Ralph Arthur Nablow has argued exerts a particular influence on Voltaire’s *Micromégas*; a direct thread across time, connecting this modern fable to antiquity³⁸. In Lucian’s story, the philosopher Menippus feels so disillusioned at the disagreements of philosophers that he fabricates wings so he can fly up to see the Truth for himself³⁹. From the celestial vantage thereby achieved: «I rested myself, looking down on the earth from on high and like Homer’s Zeus, now observing the land of the horse-loving Thracians, now the land of the Mysians, and presently, if I like, Greece, Persia and India; and from all this I got my fill of kaleidoscopic pleasure»⁴⁰.

Menippus’ Icarean view revealed a “cacophonous, ridiculous hodge-podge” beneath him, as Hadot glosses⁴¹. In particular, the conflicts between armies over cities and invisible borders⁴², as well as the plots, prides, and possessions of the rich and powerful⁴³, now seemed ridiculous. Greece itself was the size of “four inches”⁴⁴; human cities seemed “ant-hills”, and their denizens so many senselessly scuttling insects⁴⁵.

³⁴ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, IX, 30.

³⁵ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, VII, 48, cited at p. 245; see P. Hadot, *Inner Citadel*, cit., pp. 143-44, pp. 170-179.

³⁶ P. Hadot, *View from Above*, cit., p. 247.

³⁷ Lucian, *Icaromenippus, or the Spy-Man*, in *The Works of Lucian of Samosata*, Vol. III, trans. H. W. Fowler and F. G. Fowler, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1905.

³⁸ R. A. Nablow, *Was Voltaire Influenced by Lucian in “Micromégas”*, «Romance Notes», vol. 22, n. 2 (1981), pp. 186-191; cfr. M. Mat-Hasquin, *Voltaire et l’antiquité grecque*, pp. 96-101; N. Cronk, *The Voltairean Genre of the “Conte philosophique”: Does it Exist?*, in *Enlightenment and Narrative: Essays in Honor of Richard A. Francis by Colleagues and Friends*, ed. P. Robinson, «Nottingham French Studies», vol. 48, n. 3 (2009), pp. 61-73; N. Cronk & J.L. Shank, «Introduction» to N. Cronk & J.L. Shank eds., *Micromégas and Other Texts (1738-1742)*, *Les oeuvres complètes de Voltaire*, 20c, Voltaire Foundation, Oxford 2017, pp. 25-29; N. Cronk, *Voltaire, Lucian, and the Philosophical Traveller*, in *L’invitation au voyage, Studies in Honour of Peter France*, ed. J. Renwick, Voltaire Foundation, Oxford 2000, pp. 83-84.

³⁹ Cfr. Nablow, *Was Voltaire Influenced by Lucian in “Micromégas”*, cit., p. 188.

⁴⁰ Lucian, *Icaromenippus*, cit., p. 132; P. Hadot, *View from Above*, cit., at p. 246.

⁴¹ Cfr. P. Hadot, *View from Above*, cit., p. 246.

⁴² Lucian, *Icaromenippus*, cit., pp. 136-137.

⁴³ Ivi, p. 135.

⁴⁴ Ivi, p. 136; R.A. Nablow, *Was Voltaire Influenced by Lucian in “Micromégas”*, cit., p. 189.

⁴⁵ Ivi, p. 137; P. Hadot, *View from Above*, cit., pp. 245-246; cfr. Cronk & Shank, «Introduction», pp. 28-29. *Tout Voltaire* confirms that Voltaire uses the term *fourmilière* to describe the human species in the “Bien” entry in *Opinion en alphabet*, in the “Miracles” entry of *Dictionnaire philosophique* as

With these two, elevating and downwards-looking dimensions to the view from above exercises as Hadot charts its modulations in the ancient texts in place, we can turn now to Voltaire's *Micromégas*.

3. *Micromégas and the View from Sirius*

“On one of the planets that orbits the star named Sirius there lived a spirited young man, who I had the honor of meeting on the last voyage he made to our little ant hill,” Voltaire's remarkable tale *Micromégas* begins: “He was called Micromégas, a fitting name for anyone so great. He was eight leagues tall, or 24,000 geometric paces of five feet each”⁴⁶. And so a comedy of scale or of “measurement”, condensed in the “small (*micro*)” and “great (*mégas*)” of the hero's name, unfolds⁴⁷.

The scale is temporal, as well as spatial. Micromégas, we are told, «was not even 250 years old» when he studied at the most celebrated colleges on Sirius and managed through will alone to work out some fifty of Euclid's propositions, twenty more than Blaise Pascal⁴⁸. After having some of his work censored by a “mufti” on Sirius, Micromégas decided to travel as a kind of spiritual exercise: «voyaging from planet to planet in order to develop his mind (*l'esprit*) and heart, as one says»⁴⁹.

In his travels, he meets the Secretary of the Academy on Saturn, who is only about 6000 feet tall, has just 72 senses, and lives for only «500 great revolutions around the sun... (This translates to about 15,000 years, by our standards)», all in mathematical proportion to the relative scale of his massive home planet⁵⁰. The travellers soon come upon the for them tiny planet, earth. After circumambulating its surface, they cool their heels in the Baltic⁵¹. There, after the Saturnian drops some giant pearls, they glimpse a whale⁵², then a boat. It is the vessel coming back from Lapland where in 1736, Isaac Newton's predictions on the arc of the terrestrial meridian near the poles, were confirmed⁵³.

well as ch. 22 of *The Treatise on Toleration*. Again highly interestingly with a view to Voltaire (cfr. J. H. Brumfitt, *Voltaire Historian*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1958), Hadot concludes his reflections on Lucian by noting that the Cynic satirist also associates such an elevated vision with the impartiality of the historian, beyond all tribal or particular allegiances: «equally well disposed to all, making no concessions either to friendship or to hate», *View from Above*, cit., p. 247.

⁴⁶ Voltaire, *Micromégas*, in *Voltaire, Romans et contes*, éd. F. Deloffre et J. Van den Heuvel, Gallimard, Paris 1979, p. 19.

⁴⁷ See Pearson, *Fables of Reason*, cit., pp. 69-70.

⁴⁸ Cfr. Voltaire, *Micromégas*, cit., p. 20.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁰ Ivi, pp. 21-23. Sirius is the brightest star in the night sky, with a 1.2-million-kilometer radius, over 70 percent greater than that of the sun, and many orders of magnitude larger than that of the earth. See Voltaire, *Micromégas*, cit., pp. 19-20.

⁵¹ Cfr. Voltaire, *Micromégas*, cit., pp. 24-26.

⁵² Ivi, p. 28.

⁵³ Cfr. Voltaire, *Micromégas*, cit., p. 128. N. Cronk & J.L. Shank, «Introduction», p. 9; R. Pearson, *The Fables of Reason: A Study of Voltaire's Contes Philosophiques*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1993, p. 52.

At first, because of their sheer tininess, neither giant can believe the human sailors on-board could possess a soul or the ability to speak. After various technical operations make it possible for the giants to see and converse with the “animalcules”, however, Micromégas addresses the expedition: «Invisible insects, that the hand of the Creator has caused to spring up in the abyss of the infinitely small ... I offer you my protection»⁵⁴. A comic exchange ensues concerning human customs, science, natural philosophy, and the soul featuring the Cartesian, Thomist, Malebranchian and Lockean philosophers who chance to be on board⁵⁵. At its culmination, moved by affection for the little creatures, Micromégas promises that he will write them a book explaining «*le bout des choses*». Yet, as the *conte* concludes: «It was taken to the academy of science in Paris, but when the ancient secretary [M. Fontenelle] opened it, he saw nothing but blank pages. «“Ah!” he said, “I had no doubt about it”»⁵⁶.

Micromégas is both a much-loved philosophical fable or *conte*⁵⁷, and one that has attracted relatively little scholarly commentary. Ira Wade’s *Voltaire’s Micromégas: A Study in the Fusion of Science, Myth and Art* is the only monograph-length study devoted to trying to fathom the meaning of this Voltairean “fadaise”⁵⁸. Wade dates its earliest forms to as early as 1739-39⁵⁹, as do Cronk and Shank in their more recent critical edition of the text, under the abandoned title *Voyage du baron de Gangan*⁶⁰. This places the text at the end of Voltaire’s most intense engagement with Newtonian physics, culminating in the *Éléments de la philosophie de Newton*⁶¹. When the text was published in 1751, Voltaire instructed that it should open volume 10 of the new *Œuvres de Voltaire*, edited by Michel Lambert, where it preceded a series of Voltaire’s publications on the sciences of the previous decades⁶². Wade accordingly sees *Micromégas*’s meaning as directly related, *in some way*, to Voltaire’s reflections on the new sciences. But with this much said, he oscillates as to whether the text suggests Voltaire’s despair or optimism about these sciences⁶³. He ends by hypothesising that we should see in *Micromégas* Voltaire’s despairing assessment of the inability of the sciences to inform *la morale*, Voltaire’s sense that «science cannot teach us to read understandingly the book of life, science

⁵⁴ Cfr. Voltaire, *Micromégas*, cit., pp. 31-32.

⁵⁵ Cfr. *ivi*, pp. 33-37.

⁵⁶ Cfr. *ivi*, p. 37.

⁵⁷ See N. Cronk & J.L. Shank, «Introduction», cit., pp. 24-25; cfr. N. Cronk, *The Voltairean Genre of the “Conte philosophique”: Does it Exist?*, cit.

⁵⁸ Voltaire, at I. Wade, *Voltaire’s Micromégas: A Study in the Fusion of Science, Myth and Art*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1950, p. 107.

⁵⁹ I. Wade, *Voltaire’s Micromégas*, cit., pp. 32-34.

⁶⁰ W. H. Barber, *Voltaire’s Astronauts*, in «French Studies», vol. 30, n. 1 (1976), p. 35; N. Cronk & J.L. Shank, “Introduction”, pp. 7-8, pp. 17-19; R. Pearson, *Fables of Reason*, cit., p. 50.

⁶¹ Cronk & Shank, «Introduction», cit., pp. 9-10, p. 13.

⁶² *Ivi*, pp. 13-14.

⁶³ I. Wade, *Voltaire’s Micromégas*, cit., pp. 107-110.

cannot bring happiness, nor contentment, nor serenity»⁶⁴. Nablow likewise, highlighting the Lucianic inheritance of the *conte*, lays stress solely on what we called in Part 1 the disenchanting katascopic or downwards-looking dimension of its imaginative playing out of a view from above on human affairs, as an exercise in humbling human vanity⁶⁵.

In contrast to these readings, if we apply Hadot's analysis of the view from above exercise to Voltaire's *Micromégas*, a different, more nuanced, and elevating as well as disenchanting signification emerges from the text. Hadot himself mentions Voltaire's philosophical *conte*, *Micromégas*, in connection with the view from above *topos* in *N'Oublie pas de vivre*, his final book on Goethe⁶⁶. But he does not develop the analysis. There is small wonder in this, given the hero's home on the planet Sirius. In "View from Above", in fact, Hadot had identified the "view from Sirius" as a modern legatee of the ancient meditative *topos*⁶⁷. The mathematical sublimity of Sirius, this massive star some 70 times the diameter of our sun, Hadot notes, made it for moderns like Ernst Renan, an admirer of Voltaire⁶⁸, a privileged synecdoche for the largeness of the cosmos itself: «viewed from the solar system, our revolutions have scarcely the extent of the movements of atoms. Considered from Sirius, they are even smaller still»⁶⁹.

Voltaire's text is multi-dimensional. At a literary level, its debts especially to Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and Cyrano de Bergerac's *Histoire comique des États et Empires de la Lune* and the genre of "imaginary voyages" to other planets are clear⁷⁰. Its astronomical *mise en scene*, on the other hand, owes clear debts to the leading scientific discoveries of the times⁷¹. As Cronk and Shank comment, «*Micromégas* is saturated with precise and often highly accurate scientific content (by early eighteenth-century standards at least)»⁷².

Two sides are operative here. On the one (macroscopic) hand, there are early modern texts which, on the basis of the astronomical revolution, speculated in more or less Epicurean terms upon the possible plurality of inhabited planets⁷³. Voltaire was almost certainly aware, first of all, of Bonamy's 1733 article in the *Mémoires de l'Académie des Inscriptions* on the «Sentiments des anciens philosophes sur la pluralité des mondes»⁷⁴. Whilst Galileo demurred, Kepler

⁶⁴ Ivi, pp. 115-16 and p. 77.

⁶⁵ R. A. Nablow, *Was Voltaire Influenced by Lucian in "Micromégas"*, cit., pp. 186-191.

⁶⁶ P. Hadot, *N'Oublie pas de vivre*, cit., p. 115. On the different possible dates, see I. Wade, *Voltaire's Micromégas*, ch. 2.

⁶⁷ Hadot, *View from Above*, cit., p. 247.

⁶⁸ See R. Pomeau, *Renan et Voltaire*, in «*Études Renaniennes*», vol. 35 (1978), pp. 11-14.

⁶⁹ Renan, at Hadot, *View from Above*, cit., p. 247.

⁷⁰ I. Wade, *Voltaire's Micromégas*, cit., pp. 80-82; cfr. N. Cronk & J.L. Shank, «Introduction», cit., pp. 31-32; pp. 40-42; R. Pearson, *Fables of Reason*, cit., pp. 58-59.

⁷¹ I. Wade, *Voltaire's Micromégas*, cit., pp. 37-87; N. Cronk & J.L. Shank, «Introduction», cit., pp. 31-35.

⁷² N. Cronk & J.L. Shank, "Introduction", p. 9.

⁷³ I. Wade, *Voltaire's Micromégas*, cit., pp. 37-87; N. Cronk & J.L. Shank, «Introduction», cit., pp. 33-35.

⁷⁴ Ivi, p. 41.

shared Nicolas of Cusa's conviction in the great probability of other inhabited worlds⁷⁵. Huygens in his *Systema saturnium* of 1659 contended that there must be other inhabited planets and his 1698 *Cosmotheos*, adopted the *topos* of the view from above, imaginatively placing himself on one such planet in order to reframe human life⁷⁶. The most widely read 17th century advocate of the idea of a plurality of inhabited worlds in fact duly appears in person in the closing *aperçu* in *Micromégas*, is Bernard le Fontenelle, author of the 1686 *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes*⁷⁷.

On the other (microscopic) hand, and of similar importance for Voltaire's *Micromégas*, are the experiments with the microscope pioneered above all by Antony van Leeuwenhoek. Leeuwenhoek had manufactured his own instruments to study "animalcules" in fresh water and spermatozoa. Voltaire had access, if not to the natural philosopher's letters, then to his contributions to the *Philosophical Transactions* of the Royal Society⁷⁸. Leeuwenhoek discovered, depicted and measured the extraordinarily miniscule sizes of a seeming world of hitherto undreamed-of «very little living creatures»⁷⁹. As many as thirty million such organisms, Leeuwenhoek speculated, might occupy the space of one coarse grain of sand⁸⁰. At the same time, the complex, highly differentiated structures of the micro-organisms amazed Leeuwenbroek. Indeed, as Voltaire would also do, he assessed this extraordinary complexity in even the smallest beings as powerful testimony to an «inconceivable Providence»⁸¹.

As much as the astronomical discoveries following the invention of the telescope, the opening up of the world of the miniscule gave rise to the speculations and imaginations which inform *Micromégas*. If infinitely smaller worlds of organisms than ours exist, might not our world appear infinitely small for the denizens of some much larger worlds? Indeed, might not there be «an infinite chain of worlds and creatures which extended from the infinitely small to the inconceivably great»⁸²? Pascal in the *Pensées*, in the reflection entitled *Disproportion de l'Homme*, a text certainly known to Voltaire (Pascal being the first named human in *Micromégas*)⁸³, speculated that human beings, in the light of the sciences of the very great and very small, can only be intermediate creatures unable to comprehend either extreme in scale⁸⁴. As in Malebranche's *Recherche de la vérité*, such Pascalian speculations gave rise to new figurings of the ancient sceptical trope

⁷⁵ Ivi, p. 46; N. Cronk & J.L. Shank, «Introduction», cit., pp. 33-34.

⁷⁶ Ivi, pp. 52-53; N. Cronk & J. L. Shank, «Introduction», cit., pp. 34-35.

⁷⁷ Ivi, p. 48; N. Cronk & J. L. Shank, «Introduction», cit., pp. 6-7, pp. 15-16, pp. 35-39; cfr. R. Pearson, *Fables of Reason*, cit., pp. 62-63.

⁷⁸ I. Wade, *Voltaire's Micromégas*, cit., pp. 62-63.

⁷⁹ At ivi, p. 62.

⁸⁰ Ivi, p. 63.

⁸¹ Ivi, pp. 63-64.

⁸² Ivi, p. 64.

⁸³ Ivi, p. 120; Voltaire, *Lettres Philosophiques*, Garnier-Flammarion, Paris 1964, pp. 160-85; R. Pearson, *Fables of Reason*, cit., pp. 65-67.

⁸⁴ I. Wade, *Voltaire's Micromégas*, cit., p. 66.

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which Voltaire makes great sport with in *Micromégas*: that of the relativity of our senses, and of the senses of all creatures, to objects contingently proportioned to their scales and interests, as against having access to the world as it is in itself⁸⁵.

So, what then should we say concerning Wade's assessment that, by staging in fictional form something like Pascal's meditations on the disproportion of man, *Micromégas* attests to Voltaire's deeply pessimistic sense that the sciences' ascension came «at the expense of [human] dignity» afforded by older religion and philosophy⁸⁶?

If we read *Micromégas* as an 18th century modulation of the ancient *topos* of the view from above, it becomes clear that Wade, Nablow, and others stress only the katasopic dimension involved when Voltaire's *conte* asks his readers to reframe their sense of human reality, by imagining how we would appear to a giant being from Sirius (119-120). This dimension of the text is most certainly there and provides most of the humor of the text. Echoing the ancient texts of the Stoics and Cynics, Voltaire describes the denizens of the earth from these Sirian heights as "atoms"; or again, echoing another ancient *topos*, as «invisible insects, whom the hand of the Creator has pleased to be born in the abyss of the infinitely small ...» (31-32) Using Leeuwenhoek's term, the men on the Lapland exhibition are depicted also as "animalcules", able to be seen by the Sirian and Saturnian only through artfully fabricated instruments. Voltaire is explicit as to the basis of his conceit here: «What marvellous skill it must have taken for our philosopher from Sirius to perceive the atoms I have just spoken of. When Leuwenhoek and Hartsoëker tinkered with the first or thought they saw the grains that make us up, they did not by any means make such an astonishing discovery»⁸⁷.

As we anticipated in Part 2, the Cynic satirist Lucian's *Icaromenippus* also forms a direct "intertext" for Voltaire's *Micromégas*⁸⁸. Just as in Lucian's text, this rescaling of human concerns is used by Voltaire to highlight the senseless barbarity of war⁸⁹. When *Micromégas* imagines on quasi-Platonic grounds that humans, so physically tiny, must be supremely happy, "spiritual beings"⁹⁰ (33), a nameless human philosopher hence replies that:

We have more substance than is necessary ... to do evil, if evil comes from substance; and too much spirit, if evil comes from spirit. Did you know, for example, that as I am speaking with you, there are 100,000 madmen of our species wearing hats [Russians], killing 100,000 other animals wearing turbans [Turks], or being massacred

⁸⁵ Ivi, pp. 70-71; cfr. K. Tunstall, *Blindness and Enlightenment: An Essay*, Continuum, New York 2011, pp. 50-53.

⁸⁶ I. Wade, *Voltaire's Micromégas*, cit., p. 77; pp. 115-16.

⁸⁷ Ivi, p. 30.

⁸⁸ R. Nablow, *Was Voltaire Influenced by Lucian in "Micromégas"*, cit., p. 190; Cronk, *The Voltairean Genre of the "Conte philosophique": Does it Exist?*, cit., pp. 79-82; N. Cronk & J.L. Shank, «Introduction», cit. pp. 25-30; Marie Fontaine, *Voltaire à la lumière de Lucien*, thesis univ. De Rouen, dir. Fr. Bessire, 2016, at theses.fr – Marie-Odile Fontaine, *Voltaire à la lumière de Lucien*.

⁸⁹ N. Cronk & J. L. Shank, «Introduction», cit., p. 27.

⁹⁰ Voltaire, *Micromégas*, cit., p. 33.

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by them, and that we have used almost all of the surface of the Earth for this purpose since time immemorial?⁹¹

When Micromégas inquires as to the reasons for this violence, he receives this reply, itself adopting the interstellar giant's view from above:

“It is a matter”, said the philosopher, “of some piles of mud as big as your heel [the Crimea]. It is not that any of these millions of men that slit each other's throats care about this pile of mud. It is only a matter of determining if it should belong to a certain man who we call ‘Sultan’, or to another who we call, for whatever reason, ‘Czar’ (*César*). Neither one has ever seen nor will ever see the little piece of Earth, and almost none of these animals that kill each other have ever seen the animal for which they kill”.⁹²

The Sirian is outraged by the seeming insanity of the little human insects. «“Who could conceive of this excess of maniacal rage!”», he cries out. «“It makes me want to take three steps and crush this whole anthill of ridiculous assassins”»⁹³, again using a term which features in Lucian's *Icaromenippus*.

One point of Voltaire's *conte* is therefore to humble human pride. As do de Bergerac's *Voyage a la Lune* and in Lucian's *Icaromenippus*, Voltaire makes it clear enough that he wants his little text to strike a blow against what Michel de Montaigne had called “presumption”⁹⁴. So, the culmination of the dialogue of giants and the humans comes when, “unfortunately”, a Thomist “animalcule” takes the stage and expostulates proudly: «He said that he knew the secret: that everything would be found in the *Summa* of Saint Thomas. He looked the two celestial inhabitants up and down. He argued that their people, their worlds, their suns, their stars, had all been made uniquely for mankind»⁹⁵. In depicting the effects of this speech on the interstellar visitors, Voltaire makes the proximity manifest between his “view from Sirius” and the gods'-eve view staged the ancient poets which Hadot highlights⁹⁶: «At this speech, our two voyagers nearly fell over with that inextinguishable laughter which, according to Homer, is shared with the gods»⁹⁷.

This katasopic dimension of the *conte* however is not the entire story. There is also, reading the text after Hadot, the first, elevating dimension of

⁹¹ Voltaire, *Micromégas*, cit., pp. 33-34. R. Nablow, *Was Voltaire Influenced by Lucian in “Micromégas”*, cit., p. 190.

⁹² Voltaire, *Micromégas*, cit., p. 34.

⁹³ *Ibidem*, p. 34.

⁹⁴ Michel de Montaigne, “Of Presumption”, *The Essays of Michel Eyquem de Montaigne*, trans. C. Cotton, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Chicago 1952, pp. 307-322; cfr. É. M. Haag, *Diderot et Voltaire lecteurs de Montaigne: du jugement suspendu à la raison libre*, in «Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale», vol. 3 (1997), pp. 363-385.

⁹⁵ Voltaire, *Micromégas*, pp. 36-37.

⁹⁶ P. Hadot, *View from Above*, cit., p. 239.

⁹⁷ Voltaire, *Micromégas*, cit., p. 37.

this Voltairean staging of the view from Sirius (Part 2). In each of the ancient philosophical schools, we saw, to come to view things from above was also to rid oneself of those erroneous beliefs, attachments and desires that ordinarily preoccupy people. Indeed, “the goal of philosophy was to eliminate them, so that the individual might come to see things as nature herself sees them, and consequently desire nothing other than that which is natural”⁹⁸. In *Micromégas* too, the work of “loosening” the hold of our ordinary ways of seeing things, by inviting us to see things from the perspective of Sirius, is a Voltairean prompt to his readers to a new, more enlightened discipline of judgment or belief. To understand this elevating side to the text, it is decisive to give due weight to the fact that the philosopher who comes out looking best in the Sirian’s eyes, after the interstellar philosophical dialogue unfolds, is a Lockean. The reason he does so reflects Voltaire’s famous praise for Locke the *Philosophical Letters*, not as a systematic metaphysician, but a philosopher lucidly aware of the limits of his own claims to knowledge:

“I do not know”, said he, “how I think, but I know that I have only ever thought through my senses. That there are immaterial and intelligent substances I do not doubt, but that it is impossible for God to communicate thought to matter I doubt very much. I revere the eternal power. It is not my place to limit it. I affirm nothing, and content myself with believing that many more things are possible than one would think”.⁹⁹

In a work influenced by Hadot on early modern British experimental philosophy, Sorana Corneanu has shown the centrality to this lineage, dear to Voltaire, of the inquirer developing a self-critical awareness of the differing degrees of probability of their assertions, and the limits of their understanding¹⁰⁰. Far from being wholly destructive, such a limited skepticism is what makes possible the development of cumulative, collective, experimental cultures of natural-philosophical inquiry. It is just this combination of epistemic humility and disciplined experimental inquiry that Voltaire lauds for us in *Micromégas*, in a clear departure from the Lucianic precedent, when he has the little human natural philosophers explain to the giants the extent of the natural knowledge¹⁰¹. They surprise the giants when they accurately calculate the latter’s heights using geometry and measuring devices¹⁰². They readily inform their interstellar visitors about various astronomical esoterica and the weight of the air¹⁰³. «Voltaire thus

⁹⁸ P. Hadot, *View from Above*, cit. p. 242.

⁹⁹ Voltaire, *Micromégas*, cit., pp. 36. Cfr. also Voltaire, *Lettres philosophiques*, pp. 82-86; J. Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Wordsworth Editions, Hertfordshire, 2014, book IV, 3, 6.

¹⁰⁰ S. Corneanu, *Regimens of the Mind*, Chicago, Chicago UP, 2011, esp. pp. 141-197.

¹⁰¹ N. Cronk & J. L. Shank, «Introduction», cit., p. 28; R. Pearson, *Fables of Reason*, cit., pp. 71-72.

¹⁰² Voltaire, *Micromégas*, cit., pp. 32-33. W. H. Barber, *Voltaire’s Astronauts*, cit., p. 36.

¹⁰³ Voltaire, *Micromégas*, cit., pp. 32.

insists on a distinction between empirical knowledge of the natural world and metaphysical speculation about the nature of the soul»¹⁰⁴, as Cronk observes. Voltaire's katasopic mocking of humans' unfounded metaphysical pretensions, in the person of the anthropocentric Thomist, is the flipside of a perspective which celebrates the elevating natural philosophical achievements of the moderns, founded on self-limiting, critical modes of experimental inquiry.

We see the same contrast in the comparison which Voltaire sets up between Micromégas the Sirian, and his friend, the Saturnian academic¹⁰⁵. When the two giants arrive on earth, the Saturnian hypothesises very quickly that the globe cannot be inhabited, since his unaided eyes can as yet make out no living creatures¹⁰⁶. When they spot a whale, he falsely generalises that the planet must be solely inhabited by these denizens of the sea, «and as he was a very good reasoner, he was determined to infer the origin and evolution of such a small atom; whether it had ideas, a will, liberty»¹⁰⁷. In Voltaire's terms, the Saturnian (from the traditional planet of contemplation) is a systematising metaphysician or theologian waiting to happen¹⁰⁸. Micromégas, Voltaire's elevated sage in this text, by contrast chastens his interstellar colleague, reminding him that there are many things that exist which he cannot directly perceive¹⁰⁹. When the giant Saturnian "dwarf" protests that he had "felt around a lot" before judging as to the earth's inhabitants, Micromégas answers by reminding him, from the perspective of one with a thousand senses, that «you have pretty weak senses»¹¹⁰.

This, precisely, does not mean that Voltaire's Micromégas is omniscient, a being whose wisdom would come from his, by human standards, virtually unlimited knowledge and capacities¹¹¹. In his response to the surprising mathematical feats of the human animalcules, Micromégas instead replies as a giant Locke-Voltairean. Torn between humility at his own limits and wonder at the scale and complexity of the universe, he apostrophises the Creator:

I see more than ever that one must not judge anything by its apparent size. Oh God! you who have given intelligence to substance that appears contemptible. The infinitely small costs you as little as the infinitely large; and if it is possible that there are such small beings as these, there may just as well be a spirit bigger than those of the superb animals that I have seen in the heavens, whose feet alone would cover this planet.¹¹²

¹⁰⁴ N. Cronk, *The Voltairean Genre of the "Conte philosophique": Does it Exist?*, cit., p. 82.

¹⁰⁵ Cfr. R. Pearson, *Fables of Reason*, cit., p. 62.

¹⁰⁶ Voltaire, *Micromégas*, cit., p. 27.

¹⁰⁷ Ivi, p. 28.

¹⁰⁸ Ivi, pp. 62-64.

¹⁰⁹ Cfr. Voltaire, *Micromégas*, cit., pp. 33-34.

¹¹⁰ Ivi, p. 27.

¹¹¹ W. H. Barber, *Voltaire's Astronauts*, cit., pp. 36-37.

¹¹² Voltaire, *Micromégas*, cit., p. 33. Cfr. R. Pearson, *Fables of Reason*, p. 67.

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If *Micromégas* is without question a kind of ideal sage-figure for Voltaire¹¹³, the wisdom of his “view from Sirius” has two sides. On the one hand, his interstellar travels have acquainted him with a great variety of things. He has patiently collected, and been above all impressed by the unpredicted variety he has encountered in his manifold experiences: «[h]ave I not told you that in my travels I have always noticed variety?»¹¹⁴. On the other hand, the more he knows, the more serenely aware the Voltairean sage has become of the limits of his knowledge; as when he leaves the pages of his book promising to explain the final secrets to the curious humans blank¹¹⁵.

Cultivating such humility in oneself and others, Voltaire believes, is the beginning of the possibility a more urbane, enlightened culture, freed from the sectarian violence that had ravaged early modern Europe since the Reformation. Like the ancient sceptics, and like Montaigne and Bayle before him, Voltaire believed that the kinds of “fanaticism” that feed sectarian violence reflect agents’ convictions that they “knowing” that they are metaphysically Right, so they can with good conscience coerce, exile, or kill others who disagree with them¹¹⁶. Voltaire signals that he has the seeds of such fanaticism in his sights in *Micromégas* firstly by belittling the cosmic hybris of the Thomist¹¹⁷, secondly by the opening tale (mentioned above) of the religious censorship of young *Micromégas*’ scientific work by a Sirian Mufti¹¹⁸. Above all, thirdly, and in stark contrast to *Micromégas*’ openness to the unexpected, there is here the Saturnian Academic’s surprise at the little humans’ scientific acumen, which straight away spurs in him a precipitous impulse towards persecution, tempting him «to accuse of being sorcerers (*sorciers*) the same people he had refused a soul fifteen minutes earlier»¹¹⁹.

The only cure for the “disease” of fanaticism, Voltaire claim in the *Dictionnaire philosophique*, using medical vocabulary central to many ancient philosophical texts¹²⁰, is philosophy as a disciplined practice of testing and limiting our judgments against what experience and testimony certify. Only a culture which had widely embraced such an enlightenment, he says, could «at length civilize and

¹¹³ Cfr. P. Hadot, “The Sage and the World”, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, pp. 251-263; “The Figure of the Sage in Greco-Roman Antiquity”, *Selected Essays*, pp. 185-206.

¹¹⁴ Voltaire, *Micromégas*, cit., p. 27.

¹¹⁵ Ivi, p. 37. Cfr. also W. H. Barber, “Voltaire’s Astronauts”, pp. 36-37.

¹¹⁶ Voltaire, “Du Fanatisme”, *Dictionnaire philosophique II: David-Vertu, Œuvres complètes de Voltaire / Complete works of Voltaire*, Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 1968-, tome 36, TOUT VOLTAIRE (uchicago.edu); cfr. S. Pujol, *Forms and Aims of Voltairean Scepticism*, in S. Charles, P. J. Smith eds., *Scepticism in the Eighteenth Century: Enlightenment, Lumières, Aufklärung*, Springer, Leiden 2013, pp. 189-204; H. Mason, *Voltaire and Bayle*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1963; É. M. Haag, *Diderot et Voltaire, lecteurs de Montaigne*, cit., pp. 365-383.

¹¹⁷ Voltaire, *Micromégas*, cit., pp. 36-37.

¹¹⁸ Ivi, pp. 20-21.

¹¹⁹ Ivi, p. 35.

¹²⁰ Cfr. M. Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*, Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ) 1994.

soften the manners of men and prevent the access of the disease ... for the effect of philosophy is to render the soul tranquil, and fanaticism and tranquillity are totally incompatible»¹²¹.

When we read *Micromegas* via Hadot's work on the *topos* and exercise of the view from above, we can see how the *joy* in the text's comedy comes not only from the comic disenchantment of microscopic human affairs, in the view from Sirius. It also hails from the humble elevation and measured greatness of soul such disenchantment enables, embodied in Micromegas himself, and pervading the gently ironic voice of Voltaire's narrator in the *conte*.

4. *The view from above and the philosophical texts in the French enlightenment*

One prominent criticism of Pierre Hadot's work on philosophy as a way of life is that this conception of philosophy does not survive in modernity, except in isolated exceptions. At some point before the 18th century, whether with the Alexandrian commentators, the Church fathers, the medieval scholastics, or "the Cartesian moment"¹²², philosophy ceased in the West to be conceived as more than a work of theory-construction, its products treatises and learned articles, not transformed human beings. A related criticism sees the ancient-philosophical spiritual exercises and ways of life as necessarily dependent on the premodern ontologies in which they were framed. One cannot practice philosophy as a way of life in the post-Newtonian world, this argument runs. For moderns in the infinite universe of modern astronomy can no longer identify with the viewpoint of the cosmos, as conceived by the Stoics or Platonists. Nor can we aspire to live in harmony with a nature we no longer view as structured by a living intelligence or transcendent One.

Hadot's own position on these subjects was complex. Notably in his "interrupted dialogue" with Michel Foucault, he wrestled with whether ancient philosophical forms of living, and spiritual exercises, could be conceived and practiced independently of their original, framing ontologies¹²³. Yet more often, as in "Forms of Life and Forms of Discourse", Hadot's approach is, if not eclectic, then open to the ways that the "models", "formulae" or *topoi* governing ancient conceptions of the spiritual exercises, and the philosophy of nature, survived in "the Renaissance and in the modern world with the very meaning these models of thought had during the Greco-Roman period, especially at the end of antiquity"¹²⁴.

¹²¹ Voltaire, "Du Fanatisme", cit.

¹²² M. Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1981-82*, trans. G. Burchill, Picador, New York 2005, pp. 14-19.

¹²³ Cfr. esp. P. Hadot, *An Interrupted Dialogue with Michel Foucault: Convergences and Divergences*, in *Selected Essays*, cit., pp. 230-231: cfr. P. Hadot, *Reflections on the Idea of 'the Cultivation of the Self'*, in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, cit., p. 212.

¹²⁴ P. Hadot, *Forms of Life and Forms of Discourse*, cit., p. 67. Hadot is aware, also, of the way that the worldview developed by modern natural philosophy into the 18th and 19th centuries re-

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Rather than postulating a total break with ancient conceptions of philosophy in the early modern period, the work of this paper on Voltaire's *conte*, *Micromégas* suggests a 'medial' approach to this subject. With *Micromégas*, we have an enlightenment text with direct ancient antecedents in Lucian's *Icaromenippus*, refiguring the ancient *topos* of the view from above, in both its katasopic and its elevating dimensions. Indeed, we saw how Hadot's account of the ancient *topos* pointed us towards the registration of its elevating dimension, in the conception of a Voltairean "learned ignorance", awake to its own limits, and submitting its judgments to the test of post-Lockean, experimental philosophy. What this study attests is that while, by the time of the 18th century enlightenment, many aspects of ancient philosophical culture (led of course by the schools) were absent, key formulae and *topoi* identified by Hadot's researches like the view from above, as well as long-standing conceptions of the nature and functions of philosophy, survived in the philosophical texts of this extraordinary period. As Cronk and Shank have observed¹²⁵, in fact, the view from above, and the depiction of humans as miniscule beings in the cosmic scale, appears often in Voltaire, not simply in the *contes*, but also at especially decisive moments in Voltaire's other philosophical works¹²⁶. Voltaire's 1736 *Treatise on Metaphysics*, arguably his most traditional philosophical work by our lights, for example, literally opens with the conceit of a view from above, with Voltaire adopting the voice of an interstellar traveler, visiting earth for the first time:

I suppose, for example, that being born with the faculty of thought and of sense that I presently have, and not having the human form, I descend from the globe of

flected the Epicurean philosophy of antiquity, wherein such a perspective of an infinite universe was tied to a distinct philosophical mode of life. Cfr. P. Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, cit., pp. 91-145, and on Epicureanism in early modernity, P. Hadot, *Giordano Bruno et l'inspiration des Anciens*, in *Discours et mode de vie philosophique*, Belles Lettres, Paris 2014, pp. 145-151. In his study of *The View from Above* with which we have been principally concerned here, Hadot moves seamlessly from Epicurean texts to citing the 1783 poem "Hermès" by André Chénier, which aimed to celebrate the thought of the *Encyclopédie* in Lucretian verse: «Equipped with the wings of Buffon/ And lit by the torch of Newton, my flight/ Often soars, with Lucretius, beyond the azure girdle/ That stretches around the globe .../ I follow the comet with its fiery tail/ And the stars, with their weight, form and distance; / I voyage with them in their immense orbits...». Chénier, at P. Hadot, *View from Above*, cit., p. 243.

¹²⁵ N. Cronk & J. L. Shank, «Introduction», cit., p. 30. We can think, in particular, of the viewpoint of «the Eternal Creator, Preserver, Rewarder, Revenger, Forgiver, etc.» upon «all the inhabitants of the hundred thousand millions of millions of worlds that it hath pleased us to form» at the end of the entry "Dogmes", in *Dictionnaire philosophique II: David-Vertu, Œuvres complètes de Voltaire / Complete works of Voltaire*, Voltaire Foundation, Oxford 1968-, vol. 36, TOUT VOLTAIRE (uchicago.edu).

¹²⁶ *Tout Voltaire* (<https://artflsrv03.uchicago.edu/philologic4/toutvoltaire/>) confirms that Voltaire uses the figure of the "atom" to describe human beings individually and as a species in the *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne*, "Les ignorances" in *Nouveaux Mélanges* (1765), *Les adorateurs* (1769), the "Grace" entry of the *Dictionnaire Philosophique*, the "Bien, tout est", "Espace", "Eternité" and "Nature" entries in *Questions sur L'Encyclopédie*, as well as in chapters 22 and 23 of *The Treatise on Toleration* and centrally, as we shall see in Part 2 below, in his *Micromégas*.

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Mars or Jupiter [to earth]. I can cast a quick view over all the centuries, the countries, and as a consequence, on all of the nonsenses of this little globe.¹²⁷

Again, at the culmination of the *Treatise on Toleration*, Voltaire breaks from his close philosophical, legal, and philosophical analyses to appeal for charity from the Creator, looking down on miniscule and petty humanity:

Deign to look with pity on the errors attached to our nature; let not these errors prove ruinous to us. [...] Grant [...] that we may mutually aid each other to support the burden of a painful and transitory life; that the trifling differences in the garments that cover our frail bodies, in our insufficient languages, in our ridiculous customs, in our imperfect laws, in our idle opinions, in all our conditions so disproportionate in our eyes, and so equal in yours, that all the little variations that differentiate the atoms known as human beings not become occasions for hatred and persecution!¹²⁸

Different examples of this ancient *topos* could also be explored in other philosophers of the period. Yet it is especially significant that the view from above even appears in decisive moments of Denis Diderot's philosophical writings, given Diderot's hypozoic materialism, after his break with his early deism.¹²⁹ Such an ontology seems the strongest test case for the putative loss of the *topoi* and modes of thinking of the ancient philosophical, with the eclipse of ancient by modern forms of natural philosophy. Nevertheless, in perhaps the pivotal moment of his *Lettre sur les Aveugles* of 1749 – the work that saw Diderot imprisoned in Vincennes – we find a central, decisive recourse to the view from above. «What is this world, Mr. Holmes, but a complex subject to change, all of which show a continual tendency to destruction [...]?»», Diderot's hero in this text, the blind mathematician Saunderson asks his faithful companion, before ascending to a final epiphany¹³⁰:

The world seems to you eternal, just as you seem eternal to the creatures of a day; and the insect is more reasonable than you ... [W]e shall all pass away without a possibility of denoting the real extent which we took up, or the precise time of our duration. Time, matter, and space are perhaps but a point.¹³¹

¹²⁷ Voltaire, *Traité de métaphysique*, in *Les Œuvres Complètes de Voltaire*, 14, Voltaire Foundation, Oxford University, p. 418. See N. Cronk & J. L. Shank, «Introduction», cit., p. 27, n. 74.

¹²⁸ Voltaire, *Traité sur la tolérance à l'occasion de la mort de Jean Calas* [1762], in *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, éd. Louis Moland Garnier, Paris 1877-1885, Vol. 25, chap. 23, TOUT VOLTAIRE (uchicago.edu).

¹²⁹ Cfr. C. Wolfe, *Epigenesis and/as Spinozism in Diderot's Biological Project*, in O. Nachtomy and J. Smith, eds., *The Life Sciences in Early Modern Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014; J. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670-*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006, pp. 781-793.

¹³⁰ See P. Hadot, *View from Above*, cit., p. 242.

¹³¹ D. Diderot, *Letter on the Blind*, in *Early Philosophical Works*, ed. & trans. M. Jourdain, Open Court, La Salle (Illinois) 1916, pp. 113-114.

Ancient Topoi in the Philosophical Literature of the Enlightenment

Another striking Diderotian instance of the same ancient philosophical *topos*, this time starting from the infinitely small, comes at the culmination of the titular mathematician's oneiric reveries in *Le Rêve de D'Alembert*¹³²:

He [D'Alembert] said: "In [Joseph] Needham's drop of water, everything begins and ends in the twinkle of an eye. In the world, the same phenomenon lasts somewhat longer, but what is the duration of our time compared to eternity? ... An indefinite succession of animalcules in the fermenting atom, the same indefinite succession of animalcules in the other atom which we call the Earth. Who knows the animal species which preceded us? Who knows what will follow our present ones? Everything changes and passes away, only the whole remains unchanged ... In this vast ocean of matter, no single molecule resembles any other, and no single molecule resembles itself for more than a moment: *Rerum novus nascitur ordo* – that is its eternal slogan".¹³³

Without Hadot's work, contemporary philosophical readers would be unlikely to remark these passages as more than literary flourishes, missing their deep connection to ancient philosophical thought. Yet it should not escape us that Diderot's passages here, for all of the differences in ontology, closely reflect several meditations on the tininess and transience of human things in Marcus Aurelius¹³⁴. What remarking such passages does, and what rereading a text like *Micromégas* after Hadot does, is call our attention to the value of a new hermeneutic approach to rereading the texts of the enlightenment *philosophes* – exactly as the important episodes in the history of European philosophical thought they represent. It is a matter of being awake to how the philosophical literature of the French enlightenment thinkers did not break with philosophical thought, because they did not carry this thought out in genres we acknowledge today, like the treatise or *Tractatus*. Rather, such an approach makes it possible to see and consider how in their *contes* and novels ancient philosophical *topoi* and formulae were taken up by the *lumières*, refigured in light of the new sciences and prevailing sociopolitical and theological struggles of the period, played with, developed, and given exemplary form in the diegetic experiences and actions of key protagonists of fictional works, from Voltaire's *Micromegas*, *Candide*, or *Pangloss*, to Diderot's *Saunderson* or the

¹³² Having ascended imaginatively to this view from above and denounced from its cosmic perspective «the vanity of our thoughts» (the katascopic function), we are then however told by D'Alembert's lover, Julie de L'Espinasse, that he achieved such ascent as is involved in the *petit mort*: «his face became flushed. I wanted to feel his pulse, but he had hidden his hand somewhere. He seemed to be going through some kind of convulsion. His mouth was gaping, his breath gasping, he gave a deep sigh, and then a gentler one and still gentler, turned his head over on the pillow and went to sleep». D. Diderot, *D'Alembert's Dream*, in *Rameau's Nephew and D'Alembert's Dream*, trans. L. Tancock, Penguin, London 1966, p. 174.

¹³³ *Ibidem*.

¹³⁴ Cfr. egs Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, IX, 20; X, 11; X, 18; cfr. II, 12; III, 3; III, 17; IV, 31; VII, 10-11; VII, 18-19; VI, 21; VII, 25; XII.24.3.

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dreaming D'Alembert. In so doing, different, wider reading audiences were solicited and engaged than by philosophical writing today, with a view to effecting wider sociopolitical reforms¹³⁵.

We close by stressing the sense in which the view from above which has been our especial concern in this article, as Hadot tells us, represents less one particular spiritual exercise amongst others, than a constitutive dimension of the goal of philosophy as a pursuit of wisdom, in any configuration. «[I]n each philosophical school we find the same conception of the cosmic flight and the view from above as the philosophical way *par excellence* of looking at things»¹³⁶, Hadot can write. On this ancient model, this article has hoped to show, the work of the great French *philosophes* led by Voltaire, as preeminently shown by his *Micromégas*, deserve to be restored to their deeply *philosophical* aims, sources, and significances.

¹³⁵ As Voltaire put it in a letter in 1766: «il me paraît essentiel de se faire lire de tout le monde si on peut», cited at R. Pearson, *Fables of Reason*, cit., p. 8. See T. Dipiero, *Enlightenment Literature*, in *Cambridge Companion to the French Enlightenment*, ed. D. Brewer, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2014, pp. 137-152; S. Van Damme, “*Philosophe/Philosopher*”, *ibidem*, pp. 153-166.

¹³⁶ «In other words», Hadot claims, «in all schools – with the exception of Skepticism – philosophy was held to be an exercise consisting in learning to regard both society and the individuals who comprise it from the point of view of universality». P. Hadot, *View from Above*, cit., p. 242.