

Fostering toleration in secondary school students through Enlightenment philosophical tales

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Abstract

This paper argues that teachers of philosophy in school, interested in the use of literature in their classrooms, can benefit from teaching the wonderful, but today widely-neglected, literary works of the Enlightenment philosophes. As we examine in Part 1: Theory, these works of philosophical literature were written to reach a large reading public, and engage nonexpert audiences who, like our secondary students, were not necessarily otherwise interested in philosophical questioning. In particular, Enlightenment philosophical literature served to advocate to the reading public the value of religious toleration, and its epistemic preconditions, in forms of intellectual humility. These texts, we argue, are thereby perfect for classroom use in philosophy in schools. In Part 2: Exemplifications, we look at how, in Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* and Voltaire's *Micromégas*, literary conceits are used to open readers' eyes to how the ideas and customs they take for granted must appear very differently to others, and how these 'others' whom they might have previously disregarded share a good deal with 'us', and may even have things to teach us. Such an 'expanded' enlightened mindset as these texts foster through engaging readers in their stories and comedy, we propose, remains at the heart of educating our students to be good citizens in multi-faith, post-Enlightenment societies.

Key words

Montesquieu, philosophy and literature, philosophy in schools, toleration, Voltaire

... the mind is brought to anything better, and with more sweetness and happiness, if that whereunto you pretend be not first in the intention, but *tanquam aliud agendo* [acting as something else], because of the natural hatred of the mind against necessity and constraint. (Bacon 1973, II, XXII, 13)

1. Theory: Literature, philosophy, teaching, Enlightenment and toleration

What is the special value of literature in teaching philosophy, both generally and, more specifically, when it comes to teaching secondary school children? Could there be a special connection between teaching philosophical issues, debates, specific ideas and the use of literature in schools? The intriguing questions posed by this journal issue raise several wider debates. First of all, there is the ‘ancient quarrel’ itself, which Plato announced between philosophy and literature (Plato, *Republic* X, 607b). On one hand, is not philosophy, with its patented search for truth through reasoned argumentation, antagonistic to anything like literature, which has often been charged with trucking in falsehoods—not to mention of appealing primarily to the nonrational parts of our natures? On the other hand, can we really be convinced that philosophers do not avail themselves of literary and rhetorical forms of persuasion, starting with Plato himself, the author of thirty-five marvellous dialogues? Did not ‘the philosopher’ Aristotle himself tell us that all philosophising begins in wonder (*Metaphysics*, 982 b12)? Yet, if so, is not it clear that literature has a far greater power to move more people of all ages to *thaumazein* (that is, to wonder) than cold philosophy? Then again, if Socrates, Epicurus, Epictetus, Montaigne and others have been right to tell us that philosophy is above all a way of life, a work of ethical transformation in the light of reasoned claims about the world, will not philosophers be wise to lean on forms of literary writing, given literature’s proverbial power to *placere* (please) as well as *docere* (teach) (Bogumil-Notz 2009, pp. 2–3)? As the philosopher Francis Bacon (1973) explained (in a characteristically literary, metaphorical style):

If the affections in themselves were pliant and obedient to reason [alone], it were true, there should be no great use of persuasions and insinuations to the will, more than of naked proposition and proofs, but in regard of the continual mutinies and seditions of the affections [passions]: *Video meliora, Proboque; Deteriora sequor* [I see and approve the better, but I do the worse]; reason would become captive and servile, if eloquence of persuasions, did not practise and win the imagination,

from the affections' part, and contract a confederacy between the reason and imagination ... (II, XVIII, 4)

Secondly, the journal's call raises the more specific debates in philosophy of education which surround the abilities of children of different ages to philosophise, and the pedagogical question of how teachers can best foster their secondary students' nascent abilities to think philosophically. Here, as authors associated with 'philosophy in schools' have argued, the teaching of stories, looking back even to picturebooks or fairy tales, has manifest pedagogical value (Lipman 1988; Wartenberg 2009; 2022). This value hails exactly from the great power that literary language, narrative and characterisation have to capture and win the imagination in order to animate student interest and curiosity. Arguably, the first task of any educator is to inspire in students what Plato called an *erôs* (love) to learn. Disengaged students will not be learning students. However, it is very clear that many secondary students can be enthusiastically engaged by the philosophical issues faced by characters in a story they love, in ways that not all secondary school students (by a long shot) are likely to be engaged by formal syllogistic or plodding through some philosophical treatise. Philosophy education in secondary schools may not end with any work of literature we might teach. But it can certainly begin there, where otherwise it might never have got off the ground.

The specific contention of this paper is that, if we are inquiring about the special role literature can play in engaging secondary school students in philosophy, we could do a lot worse than engage with texts from arguably the period in Western philosophy in which the leading philosophes were also renowned litterateurs: the French Enlightenment (c. 1670–1720 to c. 1789). The thought of this 'age of philosophy', whose historical importance everyone agrees upon, is mostly sidelined in tertiary philosophy syllabi today. Yet, pertinently for us here, one reason for this 'academic delisting' (Wilson 2008) is almost certainly that the leading French philosophes of the period, led by Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot, as well as Rousseau, wrote works of fiction—from Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* to Diderot's plays, dialogues, and novels like *The Nun* or *Jacques the Fatalist*, via Voltaire's many philosophical contes such as *Zadig*, *Ingenu*, *Micromégas*, or *Candide* (Pearson 1993). The great philosophes' literary texts raised ethical, metaphysical, theological and political subjects and questions of the day. But they did not examine them using the argumentative methods and forms of technical writing sanctioned by academics and their managers today. Instead, they staged tales featuring confrontations between characters of different perspectives (indeed, as we'll see, from different cultures); or which placed characters in dilemmas in which

philosophical and metaphysical issues were inescapably raised; or which satirised the absurdity of people's upholding their favoured dogma despite the inevitable resistances of reality and from other people.

The philosophes' extensive use of forms of literary writing—what Roger Pearson (1993) calls 'fables of reason'—places them in stark contrast to many other philosophers in Western history. It also responded to the specific metaphilosophical way they conceived of their work. To write is to act, Voltaire famously declaimed. He and the other leading philosophes took themselves, precisely, to be critics and publicists of the scientific and philosophical ideas that had emerged across Europe over the preceding centuries. They wished to change the sociopolitical world. Rather than radical conceptual innovation, this task involved communicating—in ways open and engaging to the growing reading public—new discoveries in multiple spheres. These included advances in physics, biology, the earth sciences and astronomy since Copernicus; the no less culture-shattering discoveries of the 'new worlds' since Columbus; the recovery of the ancient pagan moral and literary texts since the Renaissance; and the philosophical developments associated with 'experimentalism' or 'empiricism' after Bacon and Locke, and continental rationalism following Descartes, including Spinoza's explosive, post-Cartesian biblical criticism (Sharpe 2023, pp. 21–42; Wade 2016).

If there is, however, one new value the Enlightenment philosophes did introduce into Western philosophical history, in connection with this publicising task, it is unquestionably that of toleration. Led by Montesquieu and Voltaire, the philosophes charged the Christian churches, after Augustine at least, with having been intolerant on the one hand towards the kinds of free inquiry that had only reemerged in Europe after circa 1500, and, on the other hand, towards philosophical and theological positions deemed heterodox by different Church authorities. As Rainer Forst's *Toleration in Conflict* (2014) documents, modern philosophical arguments for toleration emerged first within a Protestant context, as in Locke's appeal to the sovereignty of individual conscience. Yet these arguments were then augmented in the work of Pierre Bayle, Voltaire, and the Enlightenment Encyclopedists by secular, philosophical defences of this virtue. They contended that people should be tolerant of divergent opinions on metaphysical and theological matters, since no one can claim certain knowledge of these (as proven by the historical record of competing religions and sectarian strife). Yet, we can surmise with some certainty that violent persecution of our neighbours is morally problematic and socially disruptive. As Voltaire (1994) put things in his 'Toleration' entry in the *Philosophical Dictionary*:

What is tolerance? It is the appurtenance of humanity. We are all full of weakness and errors; let us mutually pardon each other our follies—it is the first law of nature. (p. 394)

So, to return to the philosophes' use of literature to philosophise which is our concern here, the political and 'pedagogical' problem which the Enlighteners faced in publicising these arguments for toleration in 18th century Europe was to convince a large enough body of public opinion—outside of the establishment clerics and the universities—of the reasonableness of what we today often take for granted: that is, multi-faith, pro-scientific liberal societies. And it was due to this desire to convince non-specialist audiences of the need for philosophically-informed ethical and political change that Voltaire and the 'little tribe' of philosophes turned so prominently to forms of literary writing, from plays to novels and *contes philosophiques* (philosophical tales). The philosophes saw, as professional philosophers perhaps today too often forget, the incontestable superiority of literature over more formal philosophical writings and modes of argumentation whenever one wants to raise philosophical subjects with non-expert audiences who might otherwise have no interest in considering them—let alone if one is trying to persuade such audiences of the merits of a controversial philosophical stance like that of supporting religious toleration in 18th century Europe.

What this means for teachers of philosophy in schools today is that the philosophes' situation, as philosophical advocates of heterodox and even dangerous opinions in 18th century France, has one very important parallel with their own. As the philosophes wished to goad their adult contemporaries into philosophical considerations which they might otherwise never have considered, so teachers of philosophy in secondary schools need to devise means to provoke philosophical questioning in their potentially-unwilling charges, many of whom might otherwise never give philosophical inquiry a second thought. And as the philosophes wrote artful literature in which philosophical subjects were raised for readers, almost without their noticing, so too school teachers today can use texts by Montesquieu, Voltaire and Diderot to introduce philosophical debates into their classrooms. A prospective teacher need not bring the philosophy into these literary texts. It has already been loaded in there by the philosophes. Their students will find, couched in these stories like soldiers in the belly of a Trojan horse, metaphysical questions and dilemmas such as those surrounding fate or whether this is the best of all possible worlds; ethical questions such as those surrounding the reality of evil and the possibility of the good; political questions about intercultural relations and the effects

of imperialism; as well as myriad prompts introducing the ideas of great philosophers from Spinoza and Leibniz, to Bayle, Locke or Isaac Newton.

There is a second, more specific reason why I think the philosophical literature of the Enlightenment is of especial value for teaching philosophy in schools. This concerns our continuing need as educators in multi-faith liberal societies, which have inherited the legacy of the Enlighteners' struggles, to foster in our students the virtue of toleration that the Enlightenment philosophes championed. Although modern Westerners now mostly take toleration for granted—at least, this was true until perhaps only a decade ago in nations like the United States—the philosophes knew how unappealing and counter-intuitive many people have always found it. They understood how human beings have a natural propensity to consider their own views the truest, and their own customs and ways of life the most righteous, wise and admirable—so that others are simply mistaken, if not malign. They knew that a genuinely liberal turn of mind which is basic to toleration—open to admitting the fallibility of 'our' claims to knowledge or expertise, and the possibility that others' ideas might therefore be just as well-founded or meritorious as our own—does not come easily to many people. Requiring continual work in adults, it cannot be assumed in secondary school students.

The philosophical literature of the Enlighteners is hence not simply relevant for teaching philosophy in school today, qua literature, and because the philosophes' use of a variety of literary media arguably led to works 'of such delicate wit as no other literature has ever matched' (Durant & Durant 1965, pp. 497–498). It has especial importance because key texts by Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot and others were devised as literary means to try to persuade readers of the virtue of peaceably tolerating those with whom we religiously (or politically) disagree, and of the rational grounds for such toleration in the post-Socratic awareness of our finitude and fallibility. (Let s/he who has absolute knowledge cast the first stone). These works can hence still be used in school philosophy classrooms today, for the same ends as their writers conceived them, and as we will now illustrate by looking at two case studies: Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* and *Micromégas* by Voltaire.

2. Examples of Enlightenment philosophical literature

i. The Persian Letters: Seeing oneself as an other, and the other as oneself

If triangles could make gods, one of the characters in *Persian Letters* opines, then the gods would be triangles (Montesquieu 2008, Letter [hereafter L] 58). We are all

potentially afflicted with what we might term 'epistemic egoism': seeing others and the world through the lenses of our own culture, preoccupations and inherited opinions. The early 18th century Parisians of the Regency period, when Montesquieu wrote this classic little fictional work (published 1721), were mostly no different in this regard to people anywhere else. Yet to have read Voltaire, they mostly would have assumed that Catholic France was the pinnacle of human culture, and that its way of life was far superior to those of other peoples, such as exotic 'Persians' who had not been converted to the 'True Religion', even after centuries of strife. This orthodoxy was backed by 'Throne and Altar': a theologically sanctioned monarch and an established Church, both of whom had censorship and punishments available to ensure no one strayed too far from religious or political orthodoxy.

In this context, the philosophe Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu (thankfully aka just Montesquieu) realised that the open philosophical advocacy of religious toleration, expressed in his own name, was effectively impossible. How then could he get Parisians to see that their own ways of seeing the world, and their own customs and beliefs, were not the only defensible and legitimate ways? *Persian Letters*, as its name suggests, is a little collection of 161 fictional epistles, written by, to, or about the affairs of two 'Persian' men, Rica and Usbek. These two Islamic travellers have come to Catholic Paris in 1711, intent on trying to understand this heathen world. Plausible deniability was a first advantage of this literary device for Montesquieu—beyond the ability to *placere* (please) and draw his readers in through the salacious backstory of what is happening back home at Usbek's seraglio that we quickly become aware of. Any radical opinions found in these 'Persian letters' he could protest were not his own. They belong either to the young, sprightly Rica, or the more complex and conflicted older 'other', Usbek. Putting them in others' mouths, the mouths of Islamic 'infidels', allowed these controversial opinions to find their way into public circulation.

However, plausible deniability while shifting the Parisian 'Overton window' was far from the only advantage of smuggling contraband philosophical and political ideas into the public sphere by way of a collection of letters. Secondly, Montesquieu avails himself of the comedic effect which comes from the way that the foreign Parisian world appears to these two Islamic tourists. The latter, as 'we' (the readers) would do if we went to Persia, each try to understand what they experience, so alien to things back home, according to their own categories. In this way, the pope becomes a 'grand mufti', monks 'dervishes' (Montesquieu 2008, L23; 27; 32; 39; 47, 54, 74–76; 119, 161),

and the King's ability to revalue the currency by fiat (very topical, then as now), a form of preposterous 'magic':

Then again, the king is a great magician, for his dominion extends to the minds of his subjects; he makes them think what he wishes. If he has only a million crowns in his exchequer, and has need of two millions, he has only to persuade them that one crown is worth two, and they believe it ... What I have told you of this prince need not astonish you: there is another magician more powerful still, who is master of the king's mind, as absolutely as the king is master of the minds of his subjects. This magician is called the Pope. Sometimes he makes the king believe that three are no more than one [i.e. the Trinity]; that the bread which he eats is not bread [i.e. the host]; the wine which he drinks not wine [i.e. communion wine]; and a thousand things of a like nature. (Montesquieu 2008, L24)

In this literary way, Montesquieu is gently (but controversially) inviting his French readers to relook at their own Catholic beliefs and customs from others' perspective. It is a perspective in which their taken-for-granted ways of thinking and living come to appear (perhaps for the first time to many readers) as contingent and changeable, if not every bit as curious or exotic as most Europeans of the time would have held Moslem customs to have been. So, what is going on?

By being prompted as Western readers to adopt such an estranged sense of who 'we' are, a new caution about so readily judging only outsiders to be 'irrational' or wholly other is being indirectly suggested. In classrooms today, teachers of philosophy might use the *Persian Letters* to ask students to consider how 'our' way of life—with its screens, its advertising, its cult of youth, its continuing obsession with financial matters, might look in the eyes of visitors from far away, or from another period of history. Are they so sure that our ways of life are so excellent as to surpass all others? Which of our customs might other peoples find strange, ridiculous, or even harmful? Should we therefore always be so quick to judge them?

A third, mirroring device that the *Persian Letters'* literary form allows Montesquieu involves examining, in accounts of 'exotic' Persia 'over there', exactly the kinds of problems facing modern Europe. In this device, it is not Persians looking at 'us' (Montesquieu's French-Western readers and their world) and finding our ways odd, but 'we' looking at the 'odd' Persians and seeing ... that, actually, they are far more like us than we had imagined. Principal amongst the social problems at the time in France,

which Montesquieu and the philosophes wanted to redress, was the 1685 Revocation of the Edict of Nantes granting limited toleration in France to Protestant Huguenots, leading to their mass emigration. To stress again, there was no way that Montesquieu could get away with openly denouncing Louis XIV's Revocation, without facing imprisonment or exile. He could however (and did) in *Persian Letters* have Usbek denounce the irrationality of such a policy when it happened 'over there' in the exotic East, leaving his readers to draw their own conclusions:

You know, Mirza, that some ministers of Shah Soliman formed the design of obliging all the Armenians of Persia to quit the kingdom or become Mohammedans, in the belief that our empire will continue polluted, as long as it retains within its bosom these infidels ... The persecution of the Guebres [i.e. Protestants] by our zealous Mohammedans [i.e. Catholics], has obliged them to fly in crowds into the Indies [i.e. Holland], and has deprived Persia of that nation, which labored so heartily, that it alone, by its toil, was in a fair way to overcome the sterility of our land ... with the result that the empire fell of itself, carrying along with it as a necessary consequence, that very religion which they wished to advance. If unbiased discussion were possible, I am not sure, Mirza, that it would not be a good thing for a state to have several religions. (Montesquieu 2008, L86)

Montesquieu's conceit here is to get his readers to identify with Usbek's denunciation of the 'Mohammedans' intolerance. Then, a microsecond later, they are being prompted to reflect that they themselves are as 'Mohammedans' in sanctioning the very same kind of vexatious intolerance back home towards their Protestant coreligionists. Like the restaging of Parisian life as a comedy of irrational prejudices, the *Persian Letters* is here working as a literary-philosophical provocation, to get readers to question the boundaries between 'us' and 'them', 'here' and 'over there'.

We might call the pedagogical aim of *Persian Letters* to foster in readers a kind of enlightened self-estrangement: what Genevieve Lloyd (2013) more eloquently calls 'a cosmopolitan ideal nourished by what can be seen as an expansive form of scepticism' (p. 14). At issue is what Immanuel Kant would later identify as the second maxim of Enlightenment thinking, the maxim of 'enlarged thought':

As to the second maxim belonging to our habits of thought ... [it can be fulfilled] if [a person] detaches himself from the subjective personal conditions of his judgement, which cramp the minds of so many others,

and reflects upon his own judgement from a universal standpoint (which he can only determine by shifting his ground to the standpoint of others). (Kant 1914, §40, 'Taste as a Kind of Sensus Communis')

Yet Kant presents this elevated ideal as an abstract philosophical proposition in a work of such complexity as to be closed to perhaps 98% to 99% of adults, let alone secondary school students (!). Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* gets readers to actively undergo the process of 'shifting his ground to the standpoint of others' in a charming work which was enormously popular, and remains open to young adults to read and enjoy today.

ii. Micromégas, or the view from Sirius

Voltaire's *conte philosophique*, *Micromégas*, is nowhere near as well known today as *Candide*. But from teaching the text at tertiary level, I would maintain that it can be nearly as entertaining and philosophically transformative for students. The work is decked out less like philosophy than a children's sci-fi tale—a kind of 18th century *Little Prince*. Here is how it begins:

On one of the planets that orbits the star named Sirius there lived a spirited young man, who I had the honour of meeting on the last voyage he made to our little ant hill. He was called Micromégas [small-big], a fitting name for anyone so great. He was eight leagues tall, or 24,000 geometric paces of five feet each. (Voltaire 1950, pp. 119)

Which of our students wouldn't want to read on? But, here as in the *Persian Letters*, the literary form involves a kind of philosophical Trojan Horse, drawing readers in for the pleasure of it, to then instruct them and challenge them to think philosophically, before they realise what game is afoot.

Already in the opening sentence, with this idea that our enormous (for us) planet Earth is an 'anthill', we get a hint of the key comic device that Voltaire's little fairy tale riffs upon. From what perspective, after all, can this blue planet look no bigger than something we might squash beneath our heels? From the perspective of a fictional alien being, of enormous scale, like the titular Micromégas; as well as, to a lesser extent, the 'Saturnian' he has picked up on his cosmic travels.

Beneath this 'comedy of scale', it is the same self-estranging mirror plays which we saw in *Persian Letters* that are played out by Voltaire in his interplanetary tale. How, for instance, would humans, we who have so often taken ourselves to be the pinnacle of creation, appear to such giants? As no more than insects, ants or 'animalcules'. When

they first arrive, the interstellar giants cannot really see humans, so small do we appear to them. (When the Saturnian sees a whale, he falsely infers that ours is a planet of whales!) But the cosmic visitors soon chance upon some humans, in the form of the ship which in 1736 had in historical fact travelled to Lapland to test Isaac Newton's predictions about the arc of the terrestrial meridian near the poles (Cronk & Shank 2017, p. 9; Pearson 1993, p. 52; Voltaire 1950, p. 132). It is a little vessel, accordingly, chockful of philosophers and natural scientists: perfect Voltairean conversation partners for the curious tourists, and to get Voltaire's readers to think some more whilst having a laugh.

At first, when the tiny humans' boat is hoisted up by Micromégas and the giant tries to greet them, the humans respond like good epistemic egoists. Each tries to interpret this shock according to their prefabricated customs and opinions:

If anyone has ever been surprised, it was the people who heard these words. They could not figure out where they were coming from. The chaplain of the vessel recited the exorcism prayers, the sailors swore, and the philosophers of the vessel constructed systems, but no matter what systems they came up with, they could not figure out who was talking ... (Voltaire 1950, pp. 135–36)

Some open philosophising then ensues between the giants and the humans, after the former devise unlikely instruments so they can see and hear the animalcules and communicate clearly with them. The debate turns upon the nature of the soul, since the Sirian and Saturnian visitors at first have trouble believing that animals as small as humans could possess sentience and intelligence. After a Cartesian philosopher steps forwards to try to persuade the giants of 'innate ideas' (they demur, as Voltaire did), a scholastic 'animalcule in a square hat' interrupts to declaim to the giants with strident self-certainty, that:

he knew the secret: that everything would be found in the Summa of Saint Thomas [Aquinas]. 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. (Voltaire 1950, p. 145)

For humans, such a view is very flattering, and it assumes plausibility due to the natural importance we each have in our own eyes. But for Voltaire's giants from distant, enormous planets, of course, it shows up quite differently; on hearing the cocky Thomist, 'our two voyagers nearly fell over with that inextinguishable laughter

which, according to Homer, is shared with the gods ...' (Voltaire 1950, p. 145). Micromégas, we are told, was 'a little angry that the infinitely small had an almost infinitely great pride' (Voltaire 1950, p. 145).

And so we get to the heart of the philosophical matter, beneath the Voltairean comedy. The astronomical sciences since Copernicus had enabled the charting of cosmic space and the mathematisation of gravity. These new sciences had asked human beings to expand our view of the world, far beyond the Ptolemaic–Aristotelian 'closed world' of the medievals. Given such an astronomical 'view from Sirius' (the enormity of space) back down on human affairs, Micromégas is prompting readers to ask, beneath comedy: how great and plausible do our inherited pretensions and sense of cosmic significance really seem? Are we not really hybristic, as tiny inhabitants of one planet, to imagine that we might have especial universal significance? Do we not need instead to acknowledge more humbly the limitations of our knowledges and capabilities?

Voltaire's message in Micromégas, certainly, is Socratic or Lockean, without asking readers to go through the rigours of an elenchus, or John Locke's enormous *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1975). If there is a human hero in the text, it is the little Lockean who follows the hybristic Thomist in addressing the giants. Here is what he says:

'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.' (Voltaire 1950, pp. 144–45)

Underscoring his approval, Voltaire tells us that 'the animal from Sirius smiled' when he heard this (Voltaire 1950, p. 145). Such humility, for Voltaire, is at the basis of toleration and enlightened, multi-faith societies. We will not accept others, but readily judge them unjustly, if we take ourselves to be the centre of the universe, or the pinnacle of its works. But the literary conceit of *Micromégas*, by asking readers to relook at ourselves through 'cosmic' eyes, gets us to think these thoughts without directly telling us to—so we make them our own. It hence remains a delightful basis for prompting students to adopt such an enlarged or enlightened perspective, one which balances a respect for the 'great' things humans have achieved through scientific modes of inquiry, with a recognition of our 'smallness', faced with the magnitude and

complexity of the universe thereby discovered. And all through a work of sci-fi, which teachers of philosophy in schools can advertise to their students as such.

3. Conclusion(s): From the Enlightenment public sphere to the secondary classrooms of today

This paper has focussed on just two works of philosophical fiction from the Enlightenment, arguing for their especial significance in endeavours to teach philosophy in schools. Many others might have been chosen. Our argument has been that such works of Enlightenment philosophical literature emerged from a very particular intellectual and political conjuncture: one in which open philosophical advocacy for toleration was perilous for authors like Montesquieu or Voltaire. At the same time, these authors wanted to write in ways which attracted wide readerships, requiring no technical training in philosophy or theology, or in the forms of Newtonian science dear to Voltaire. The literary staging of intercultural confrontations (as in *Persian Letters*) and even interstellar confrontations (as in *Micromégas*) to indirectly show the reasons for toleration also responded to a recognition that this modern value does not come naturally to human beings. Hence, they might best be brought to see its rationality indirectly, gently, ‘*tanquam aliud agendo* [acting as something else], because of the natural hatred of the mind against necessity and constraint’ (Bacon 1973, II, XXII, p. 13).

And for all of these reasons, we want to argue, these Enlightenment texts are almost uniquely well suited to find their places in syllabi of teachers of philosophy in schools. There is no question here of having to draw out, with difficulty, philosophical contents and conundrums from the texts; written by leading philosophers, the literary texts themselves contain and encode philosophical positions, in response to the debates of their times. Moreover, the key value of toleration that they argue for, on the basis of inculcating a sense of intellectual and intercultural humility in readers, remains core to our multi-faith societies today—the societies into which we hope as teachers to educate our students, so that they can become good democratic citizens.

As Montesquieu and Voltaire could expect resistances to advocating for tolerating competing forms of culture and belief in 18th century France, so teachers of philosophy in schools today cannot expect their students to have already developed a cosmopolitan frame of mind. We are few of us born open to accepting that our own ways of living are historically contingent and contestable, so that we might do well to doubt many of the certainties about facts and values we have been raised into. The literary devices prompting a kind of ‘enlightened self-estrangement’ in readers which

we saw in the *Persian Letters*—and which are taken up and cosmically expanded by Voltaire in *Micromégas*—were artfully designed to goad readers to question their presuppositions and prejudices about themselves and others. They do so by getting readers, or students, to look at themselves from the perspective of others—whether human beings from other cultures or imagined interstellar visitors—in unfolding dramas which are humorous, featuring heroes and villains who are curious, lovable, naïve, cunning, or simply foolish.

The potential power of these and other Enlightenment fables for teachers of philosophy in secondary schools is hence clear, we submit. (Perhaps the natural place for their overdue renaissance in our time of collapsing civilities would be in philosophy in schools?) None of these texts require technical training to understand or to enjoy. None of them engage in demanding forms of academic argumentation of such a kind as to go over students' heads or to bore so many of them as to render a class ineffective. They each involve characters with which readers are asked to identify with for long enough to undertake the lived experiment of looking at things through their eyes, and taking an interest in the consequences of their philosophical positions. They each can prompt students, invaluable in liberal societies, to estrange themselves awhile from their ordinary taken-for-granted standpoints, and to glimpse how, from the outside, we each probably look somewhat different than we egoistically imagine, just as 'others' are much more familiar, and often wiser, than we might have presupposed. They each can hence be used by teachers to nudge students towards a sense of intellectual and ethical humility, which the Enlighteners saw as a necessary precondition for toleration: pushing back against the kinds of persecutory fanaticism which arise from peoples' unquestioning, uncritical support for any worldview or ideology, secular or theological.

In the kinds of multicultural open societies which are the threatened but continuing legacy of the Enlightenment's advocacy of philosophical toleration, these are still timely pedagogical tasks.

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