

## Philosophy in Review



### Emily Thomas, "The Meaning of Travel: Philosophers Abroad."

Keith Dromm

Volume 41, numéro 3, août 2021

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081594ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081594ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

1206-5269 (imprimé)

1920-8936 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Dromm, K. (2021). Compte rendu de [Emily Thomas, "The Meaning of Travel: Philosophers Abroad."]. *Philosophy in Review*, 41(3), 218–220.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1081594ar>

Copyright © Keith Dromm, 2021



Cet document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

**Emily Thomas.** *The Meaning of Travel: Philosophers Abroad.* Oxford University Press 2020. 256 pp. \$18.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780198835400).

The middle of a global pandemic might seem like the worst time to publish a book on the philosophy of travel. Yet, while Emily Thomas surely did not anticipate her book coming out in these conditions, this might actually be the best time to philosophize about travel: not while we're traveling, and also not while we're packing, making our reservations, or otherwise distracted with the practicalities of travelling, but much earlier in our preparations, when we're still only thinking about whether, where, and how to travel. The thinking this book encourages might make our eventual travelling more significant and not merely a reprieve from lockdowns and quarantines.

But *The Meaning of Travel* is not meant only for travelers. Most of its chapters are about the influence of travel on philosophers. Those interested in the history of ideas would be rewarded by reading this book. Thomas, in fact, aims for a broad audience. She takes time to explain concepts like metaphysics, thought experiments, and Locke's innate ideas. She doesn't linger over these explanations; the book is not meant as an introduction to philosophy, and it never sounds like one. Philosophers and others not in need of these explanations would still find the book interesting and even edifying. They are also an important part of her intended audience, because Thomas hopes her book will inspire interest in the *philosophy of travel*.

In the first chapter, 'Why Do Philosophers Care About Travel?', Thomas offers her proposal for a philosophy of travel. After reading this book, many might be surprised that it is not already an established field of study. Besides the influence travel has had on philosophers, there is much to think about when it comes to travel, along with benefits to such thinking. Thomas argues that philosophical reflection on travel can enhance our experiences of it. As she says, it 'can help us think more deeply about our journeys,' which can increase 'our enjoyment and appreciation of them' (3). She also argues for the importance of travel. It brings us into contact with 'otherness,' which can expand our thinking and diminish our prejudices (3). Unfortunately, the ways we have made travel more convenient have tended to limit our exposure to otherness. Group tours and all-inclusive resorts, for example, keep us separated from the local population and culture, as well as deprive us of some of the more challenging but edifying aspects of travel, like communicating in a second language. There are also ethical implications of travel to consider. For example, should we visit ecologically fragile places? While she touches on all these topics, and others, throughout her book, Thomas leaves many issues for others to explore. For example, she doesn't explore travel among non-Western philosophers, and she begins her account in the sixteenth century, during the European Age of Discovery, because that is where she found the oldest *philosophical* treatments of travel (36). What she does cover—and it is a lot—provides a model and an inspiration for further explorations, which could potentially make the philosophy of travel into a respected field of study.

After this introductory chapter, her exploration of the philosophy of travel begins where our travels typically do, with maps. Maps can be the inspiration for travel, the targets for our figurative or literal darts, and they subsequently act as essential tools on our journeys. However, the central point of this chapter is that maps do not transparently convey information about geography. She draws on the work of Brian Harley to argue that maps are rhetorical devices that can influence the way we think about the world. One example is the Mercator map and how it locates Europe at the center, diminishing the size and prominence of other places. Thomas uses that and other examples to demonstrate that 'maps belie their simple appearance' (24).

Francis Bacon is the first philosopher influenced by travel discussed by Thomas. In the third chapter, she shows how travel was a central part of his project to reform science. Bacon convinced others that increasing knowledge required going out in the world. This inspired the founders of the British Royal Society, who echoed his call. Many heeded it, including Charles Darwin. Their travels led to the increased popularity of travel literature.

In chapter four, Thomas explains the effect this literature had on John Locke's philosophy, including his thoughts on government, innate ideas, and even the inscrutability of real essences (58). She also discusses René Descartes, who credits his travels with some of the doubts that led to his reformation project in philosophy. Both are examples of how contact with otherness can invigorate, even correct, our thinking.

Chapter five, 'Why Did Tourism Start?' examines the Grand Tour, which continued the custom of travel for edification, but also introduced travel for pleasure (Thomas points out that the pleasures sought by these early tourists were not always wholesome ones). Chapter six looks further at travel literature, including books about *imaginary* worlds, like *Description of a New World, Called the Blazing-World* (1666) by Margaret Cavendish. It enables Thomas to discuss the ideas of this very interesting, but underappreciated, seventeenth century philosopher, including her criticisms of Baconian science.

The topic of chapter seven is mountains, which introduces discussions of philosophical theories of space and, in the subsequent chapter eight, of the sublime. These theories inspired travel; as Thomas puts it about theories of the sublime: 'Philosophers picked out and labelled a particular kind of experience, the "sublime," and people found things in the world that provided it' (137). The discussion moves easily into chapter nine, which is about Henry David Thoreau, whose life serves as the model of wilderness travel, even though his version of wilderness was not very far from civilization. Still, he achieved through it the two main benefits of experiencing wilderness: solitude and connection with nature. If we cannot achieve those, we at least have 'cabin porn' (159). Thomas discusses the trend of searching for and staring at pictures of cabins, inspirations for fantasies about living in the wild.

Chapter ten, 'Is Travel a Male Concept?,' addresses the 'male gendering of travel' (175), which refers to both the stereotypes in many societies about women being unsuited to travel and the fact that the most famous travelers remain men. Thomas attempts to correct both errors by reminding us of several significant women travelers, including Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97), Isabella Bird (1831-1904), and Isabelle Eberhardt (1877-1904).

Chapter eleven examines the phenomenon of 'doom travel,' which is traveling to places whose existence is at risk because of climate change. Thomas discusses the ethical problems with such travel and portends that such problems 'may come to overshadow all other issues in the philosophy of travel' (187).

The final chapter uses the possibility of space travel to consider the way travel of all sorts can alter our perception of the significance of places and their inhabitants. She utilizes Guy Kahane's discussion of the differences between 'value' and 'significance' to advance this discussion.

Thomas' writing style violates the norm established by the Royal Society, which favored a 'descriptive, scientific style' (44); it is closer to that of *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796) by Mary Wollstonecraft, who apologizes for her frequent use of the first-person, which—she worries—tends to make her the hero and not the places she visits (44). Thomas unapologetically uses the first-person. She interweaves her accounts of others' travels with reports from a trip she took to Alaska. These are used mostly to introduce the topics of each chapter, but they also model the kind of philosophical traveling that she encourages.

The book is delightfully constructed with vintage travel advertisements placed at the beginnings of each chapter and ‘Top 10 Vintage Tips,’ culled from old sources, at the beginning and ending of the book. For example, the tips at the end of the book, all concerning the return home from travelling, include this useful advice from Plato: ‘On pain of death, avoid returning corrupted’ (201).

In a couple of places, a connection that Thomas draws between philosophy and travel might seem strained, for example, a discussion of idealism and realism within the chapter on maps. But such cases are the exception; overall, the book is a testament to the viability of the philosophy of travel, and reading it may enrich our travels, or at least our dreams about travelling while we wait out the pandemic.

**Keith Dromm**, Louisiana Scholars’ College, Northwestern State University