

Travel, Philosophy, and Locke's Openness to the Unknown

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Abstract: Travel was crucial to early modern European philosophy. This note explains the case I make for this thesis in *The Meaning of Travel*, drawing on the importance of travel to the likes of Francis Bacon, Margaret Cavendish, and John Locke. It argues that travellers and philosophers came to share a growing awareness that much of the world is unexplored, and unknown.

Keywords: Travel, Exploration, Locke.

Note

Travel was crucial to early modern European philosophy - and, in particular, to the work of John Locke. The editors of this special issue have kindly asked me to say a little about the case I make for this thesis in *The Meaning of Travel*.

Let me start by stressing that travel was hugely important to early modern Europe generally. The European 'Age of Discovery', powered by improved ship-building and navigation techniques, saw Portuguese, French, Spanish, Dutch and British sailors crisscross the globe. These fifteenth and sixteenth century ships led to new trade routes, new maps, new colonies. European states competed to 'discover' lands, societies, and goods previously unknown to them. As the preface to a popular 1704 *Collection of Voyages and Travels* explains:

Astronomy has receiv'd the Addition of many Constellations never seen before. Natural and Moral History is embellished with the most beneficial Increase of so many thousands of Plants it had never before received, so many Drugs and Spices, such variety of Beasts, Birds and Fishes, such varieties in Minerals, Mountains and Waters, such unaccountable diversity of Climates and Men.¹

¹ Anon, "Account of the Progress of Navigation", in A. Churchill (ed.), *A Collection of Voyages and Travels*, vol. 1, London 1704, p.lxxiii.

The success of these voyages led to immense public interest in travel books, maps, atlases, geography, geology, and botany. Many books around travel ran through multiple editions, including a 1662 *Geographical Dictionary*, and a 1671 *Geographical Description of the World*. At least one mapmaker built a business out of printing atlases, coasting pilots, charts, navigation handbooks, and almanacs². Gradually, European philosophers also become fascinated by travel.

In the early seventeenth century, Francis Bacon placed travel at the heart of his new philosophy of science, arguing that, through travel, science would ultimately bring about the Biblical apocalypse that would lead to the new world. René Descartes argued it is good for us to travel and learn the customs of various peoples, so we do not think everything contrary to our own ways “ridiculous and irrational”. Drawing on a long tradition of travel-themed thought experiments, Margaret Cavendish used the burgeoning travel narrative genre to craft her own philosophical thought experiment, *The Blazing World*. John Locke used travel books to fuel philosophical arguments on a broad range of topics, from innate ideas to species categorisation. In the eighteenth century, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Emile* argued that travel is essential to education. Mary Wollstonecraft used her travels through Sweden, Norway, and Denmark to advance her feminist arguments for the education of women. I argue it is no coincidence that this philosophical interest overlapped with the Age of Discovery: like everyone else, philosophers became caught up in the excitement.

Within early modern philosophy, I suspect a key element of travel must even have seemed to parallel philosophy: its exploration of the unknown. Early modern sailors sought the new, the unfamiliar. They *literally* expanded the limits of the known world. As Figure 1 shows, by 1570, European maps roughly outlined all the continents (excepting Australia and Antarctica in the ‘unknown’ south).

² On travel-related works, see M. Swann, *Curiosities and Texts: Culture of Collecting in Early Modern England*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 2001; and J. Hayden, “Intersections and Cross-Fertilization”, in J. Hayden (ed.), *Travel Narratives, the New Science, and Literary Discourse 1569-1750*, Routledge, London 2012, p. 16. On enterprising mapmaker John Sellars, see L. Worms, “Seller, John (bap. 1632, d. 1697)”, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2008. www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/25058. I discuss these aspects of the Age of Discovery further in E. Thomas “Travelling for Exploration: Science, Space Travel, and Personal Discovery”, in M. Niblett and K. Beuret (eds.), *Why Travel?*, Bristol University Press, Bristol 2021.



Several early modern philosophers seemed to share in this feeling of exploration. George Berkeley likened his investigations to a “long Voyage”, traversing “wild Mazes of Philosophy”. Halfway through *A Treatise of Human Nature*, David Hume imagines himself as a sailor who has struck shallow water, narrowly escaping shipwreck. Safety tempts him to remain perched on the rocks, rather than venturing out onto “that boundless ocean, which runs out into immensity”. Yet Hume decides he will put out to sea again, in the same “leaky weather-beaten vessel”³. Just as adventurous travellers coveted new places, these radical philosophers crafted new questions, shook old assumptions. Could the world comprise ideas? Are women rational?

In my view, the growing awareness of how *much* world there is to explore, how *many* things humans do not know, underlies many of Locke’s philosophical arguments. Locke travelled widely through Europe, and his library contained nearly two hundred travel books⁴. Some of his philosophical arguments

³ See G. Berkeley, *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*, London, 1713, Preface; and D. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature, Book I*. London 1739, pp. 457-8; p. 467.

⁴ See D. Carey, “Compiling nature’s history: travellers and travel narratives in the early Royal Society”, in *Annals of Science* 54 (1997), pp. 269-92; and A. Talbot, *“The Great Ocean of Knowledge”: The influence of travel literature on the work of John Locke*, Brill, Leiden 2010.

explicitly make use of this reading; for example, he uses descriptions of foreign plants and animals to explore problems in the way we classify biological creatures. Later, these problems drive Locke's view that we can't know the real essences of creatures⁵. I suspect they also drive Locke's reasoning on philosophical issues that are not obviously connected with travel. Reflecting on the limited extent of our knowledge, Locke famously argues that we "possibly shall never be able to know, whether Matter thinks, or no"⁶. Given the size of the universe, and the increasing numbers of creatures discovered by science, Locke's position on thinking matter seems quite sensible.

To date, only a few pieces of literature have seriously considered the connections between philosophy and travel⁷. *The Meaning of Travel* sought to address this neglect, further exploring philosophy-travel intersections in all the early moderns named above⁸. It also considers the effects that philosophy has had on travel practices. For example, Henry More divinised infinite space and, as his absolutist theory made its way into Isaac Newton and a wide variety of artists, this rendered infinite-seeming landscapes, such mountains and seascapes, more attractive to tourists. Edmund's Burke's philosophy of the sublime led to a tourist craze for waterfalls, craggy cliffs, and forbidding ruins. Finally, I showed that these philosophy-travel intersections are connected in all kinds of ways. These episodes are not isolated incidents, but rather parts of a long, rich tradition of philosophical engagement with travel. Travel is important to early modern philosophy, and to philosophy more broadly.

References

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⁵ See P. Connolly, "Travel Literature, the New World, and Locke on Species", in *Society and Politics* 7 (2013), pp. 103-16.

⁶ J. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, London 1690, IV.iii.6.

⁷ With regard to travel and early modern philosophy, I found the following especially important: D. Carey "Compiling nature's history", cit.; P. Connolly "Travel Literature", cit.; L. Cottagnies, "Utopia, Millenarianism, and the Baconian Programme of Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* (1666)", in C. Houston (ed.), *New Worlds Reflected: Travel and Utopia in the Early Modern Period*, Routledge, Aldershot 2010; M.H. Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory*, Cornell University Press, New York 1959; A. Talbot, "*Great Ocean*", cit.; and K. Winkler, "Empiricism and Multiculturalism", in *Philosophic Exchange* 34 (2004), pp. 55-84.

⁸ Although, for my work on Wollstonecraft, see E. Thomas, "The Road Less Travelled: The Case of Mary Wollstonecraft", *History Today* 71 (2021), pp. 28-39.

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