

## Book Review

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Mickey, Sam. *On the Verge of a Planetary Civilization: A Philosophy of Integral Ecology*. Rowman & Littlefield International, 2014.

In the mid-1990s, some scholars began calling for “integral” approaches to ecology, seeking collaboration between multiple ecological theories and practices in efforts to compose a planetary civilization, that is, a civilization characterized by peaceful, just, and sustainable relationships between humans and the Earth community. Sam Mickey joins the quest for integral ecology in his book, *On the Verge of a Planetary Civilization: A Philosophy of Integral Ecology*. This book is relevant to anyone working within environmental humanities. Primarily a work of environmental philosophy, this book also addresses issues in ecofeminism, ecoteology, and the field of religion and ecology.

Mickey’s main thesis is that philosophical concepts of the complexity of boundaries can support the development of integral approaches to ecology and thus facilitate the emergence of a planetary civilization. Mickey draws extensively on two postmodern French thinkers, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, whose work with “geophilosophy” and “ecosophy” aligns with the aims of integral ecology to cross boundaries between disciplines and to situate human existence in the boundaries of its planetary context. Guattari’s “three ecologies” provide an orienting model for integral ecology, ensuring the inclusion of environmental, sociocultural, and subjective/existential dimensions of ecological phenomena (13-16). Alongside Deleuze and Guattari, Mickey weaves together the concepts of many affiliated thinkers, addressing Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction, Alfred North Whitehead’s process philosophy, the cosmopolitics of Isabelle Stengers, Bruno Latour’s theory of actors, Donna Haraway’s companion species, Graham Harman’s object-oriented philosophy, Timothy Morton’s ecology without nature, and the counter-apocalyptic theology of Catherine Keller.

Focusing on concepts that convey the complex dynamics of boundaries, Mickey shows numerous ways in which a boundary (or edge, limit, border, verge, etc.) marks differences *and* connections between things. A shoreline connects beach with ocean, *and* it also marks their difference or separation. Playing on the derivation of “integral” from the Latin *tangere* (“to touch”), he describes an integral approach as a way of touching that builds connections (contact) while also leaving things untouched (intact, in-tegral). An integral ecology, therefore, plays with the intricate and delicate boundaries of tactful touching—to touch while leaving the other intact (39). Building connections with human and Earth others while respecting their difference or otherness (alterity) is a crucial part of the task of integral approaches to ecology. Integral ecology accounts for the numerous ways that connections and differences are distributed between different domains: self and other, sciences and humanities, religion and

secularity, local and global, human and nonhuman, an oppressive regime and its liberating successor, etc. Recognizing the complexity of boundaries makes it possible to find transitions and build alliances across boundaries instead of using boundaries to maintain oppressive dualisms and violent oppositions.

The book presents an exploration of the transitions between boundaries by focusing on three kinds of boundaries, beginnings, middles, and endings, which are addressed in that order in three chapters—Beginning, Middle, and Ending, preceded by an Introduction and followed by a Conclusion. That symmetry and linear order is part of the humorous and ironic performance that Mickey accomplishes in this book, as each chapter introduces concepts that indicate how boundaries are always entangled and complicated with differences, asymmetries, nonlinearity, and chaos. The humour of Mickey’s approach is balanced with the passion of philosophical speculation, which uses imagination to invent new possibilities for human-Earth relations.

The Beginning chapter introduces concepts of the dynamic, relational character of beginnings, including environmental, social, and subjective beginnings (e.g., the beginning of land at the edge of the sea, the revolutionary beginning of a new political regime, and the beginning of a decision or a moment of ethical responsibility). Beginnings happen in the middle of things. They are relational and dynamic. Attempts to control beginnings erect rigid hierarchies that fail to do justice to the uncertainty, flexibility, and difference that are constitutive of environments, societies, and subjects. The Middle chapter critiques the “hegemonic centrism” (Val Plumwood) whereby a dominant center is opposed to a periphery (51). For instance, while anthropocentric, biocentric, and ecocentric ethics each presuppose an opposition between central value and the marginalized value of the periphery, Mickey proposes an “anthropocosmic” approach for which the human and the world are conceived as mutually constitutive. This is an “omnicentrism” or “multicentrism” for which all humans and nonhumans exhibit agency and value (135). The Ending chapter addresses the apocalyptic tones of environmentalism, criticizing apocalyptic fantasies of a final end of the world or of a moral purification of all evildoers (“sinners” in religious contexts, “polluters” for environmentalists). The end of the world can facilitate a new beginning, an end to the violence and exploitation associated with global capitalism and a beginning that facilitates caring, loving human-Earth relations (“planetary love”) with strategies for an ecological democracy or “cosmopolitics” (177, 183).

While creating a planetary civilization is an ambitious goal indeed, Mickey introduces multiple new and engaging concepts to help move us through the complex boundaries of the ecological crisis and awaken us to our planetarity. Mickey demonstrates how these concepts are relevant for multiple theories and methods for building alliances across differences (e.g., postcolonial theory, feminism, critical theory, environmental ethics, and cross-disciplinary

approaches to ecology). However, it sometimes seems as though all of the diverse ways of building alliances exist in harmony with one another, when in fact there are significant tensions between them, like those between the postmodern visions of Deleuze and Derrida or between the integral visions of Thomas Berry and Ken Wilber. As Mickey himself indicates, the risk of integral thinking is that it attains an inclusive and comprehensive perspective at the cost of differences and details. Mickey's own advice would be to touch more tactfully when assembling multiple thinkers and schools of thought.

This book is a call to action, but it does not necessarily carry an activist agenda. It provides concepts that can be adopted by activists and advocates as well as scholars and researchers. However, Mickey does not spend much time giving examples of how those concepts can be put into practice to address specific environmental problems. As Mickey notes, it is a perennial complaint against philosophers that they too often "have their heads in the clouds" (26). Although the book contains an entire section devoted to examples, it is actually focused mostly on the concept of example, deconstructing the dualism between ideal (theory) and example (practice) (63-72). While this is not unimportant, it leaves one wanting more concrete descriptions that would provide a sense of what a philosophy of integral ecology looks like in actual situations. Nonetheless, even when concrete examples are lacking, this book is grounded in the real challenges facing the Earth community. It is an accessible source of philosophical concepts at the cutting edge of environmentalism. As Michael Zimmerman states on the back cover, this book points towards an "environmentalism of the future." Thinking on the verge of a planetary civilization is not easy work, but it is arguably the great work of our time, and Mickey graciously guides us into this work by thinking passionately and playfully through the complexity of beginnings, middles, and endings.

**Kimberly Carfore**