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*Encounters in Thought: Beyond Instrumental Reason*

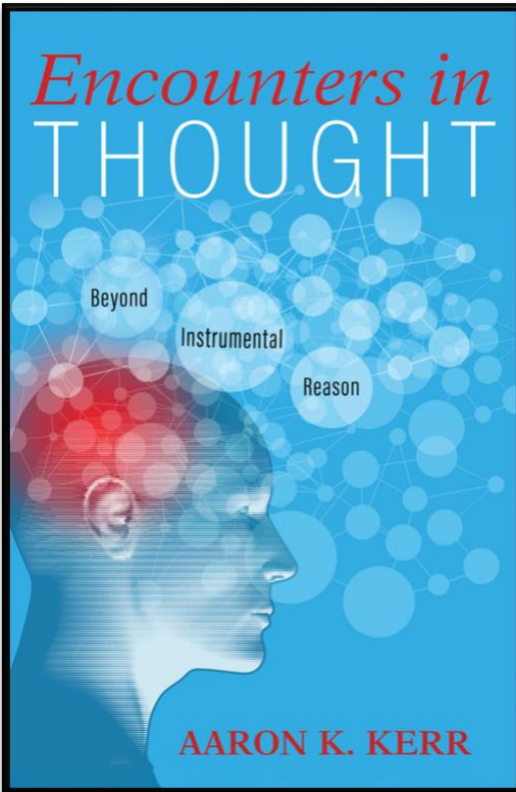
by Aaron K. Kerr

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**New Title from Aaron K. Kerr**  
*Encounters in Thought: Beyond Instrumental Reason*



Do the patterns of digital culture enhance or under-serve human reason? Are we losing a sense of reason's innate pull toward integration and concrete reality? This book is an invitation to enter the classical intellectual states of openness, wonder, receptivity, and contemplation with deeper understanding and intentionality. By describing, exemplifying and applying encounters in thought, the author convenes theory and practice. In this age of media ecology, we need deeper knowledge won in the slow orbit of reflection about the deep ecology. Encounters in thought are precisely what teachers, religious guides, seekers and students need in order to apprehend the cosmos, nature, authority, truth, and moral action. Responsibility to this ecologic age requires a reform of reason; this book is just one attempt to convey a way toward this restoration.

**Aaron K. Kerr** is associate professor of philosophy at Gannon University and chair of the philosophy department. He teaches environmental ethics and has published in the areas of the philosophy of meaning in music, the sacred, the ethics of technology, and the contemplative life.



### **1. Why did you write this book?**

In my work as a teacher and guide I had noticed the slow erosion of the ability to focus and interrogate, both in myself and others. I started to situate this problem in the context of the history of philosophy and the philosophy of technology. Our speculative powers must be engaged, actualized and refined if we are to develop alternative arrangements of simplicity to steward the earth's resources responsibly. All of us have a desire to know and an innate curiosity which our encounters enhance. I wanted to renew the search for meaning and purpose beyond the efficiency of devices.

### **2. Why “Encounters,” why not just “Thinking beyond instrumental reason”?**

Encounters are much more indefinite and ambiguous since they are events of relatedness. The industrialization of culture leading up to our digital experiences has tended to isolate, fragment and de-contextualize our thought, leading to what Alfred North Whitehead called the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. We are perpetually distracted and somewhat aloof from the richness of reality. When we presume efficiency and convenience to be the goals of human existence, we tend to cut ourselves off from our relationships with nature, others and God. Our learning, however, is always undertaken in a relational order or structure, if we don't leverage that structure to enhance reason, we lose out on more creative engagements with the problems of our time.

### **3. How does the book invite the reader to go beyond instrumental reason?**

After an introductory essay, the fruit of interviews with high-school teachers, each subsequent chapter offers theoretical descriptions about openness, wonder, receptivity and contemplation. A description is followed by an exemplification; Thomas Merton, Eva Saulitis, Malcolm X and St. Anselm serve as exemplars of the integration of intellectual and moral virtue. Then, in order to offer practices for reason to flourish, I invite the reader to reflect on daily encounters through which both understanding and analysis might become amplified, thus theory and demonstration are applied to daily life. You can encounter the text from theoretical, historical or practical angles, a sort of work-book or guide for a renewal of reason, beyond the instrumentalities and commodification that tend to reduce human perception.

### **4. Why did you choose the figures you did as exemplars?**

The short answer is that I admire each exemplar because of the authenticity of their witness. When I was younger I began reading Thomas Merton to deepen my understanding of prayer. In college, James Cone told me that if I wanted to really understand my own racism, I should read The Autobiography of Malcolm X. As an undergrad I was introduced to Anselm's ontological argument and have been thinking about it ever since. I had read about Eva Saulitis in a magazine called The Sun, and was captivated by her story, wisdom and the way she integrated poetic and scientific sensibilities.

**5. How does water fit into the story you tell, beyond instrumental reason?**

Water has been instrumentalized by what Albert Borgmann calls the device paradigm. Since it has become commodified in this way, it is underappreciated and devalued, taken for granted. In short, we cannot put a price on water, and when we do, we miss its elemental meaning. It is necessary to apply our speculative powers to water, not merely as a problem of infrastructure, but also as a gift to be cherished. We have the privilege of spending a bit of time on this watered ball, we ought to think about what it means to us, but just as significantly, what it will mean to future generations.

**6. The book opens to readers the relationship between media and deep ecology, how do those two ecologies impact politics and religion?**

Power is understood today primarily through consumerism and the media ecology. Digital devices, television, commercials, define both what power might mean, and how that power is enacted. Deep ecology is primarily an awareness of the region which sustains us, and faith employs its relational foci of compassion, care and justice in order to edify regional communities. When faith communities relish the regional they move beyond the media ecology to become part of the deep ecology; what is at hand before them. Therefore, responsibility is focused and actualized most potently where-ever you find yourself. Finding ourselves beyond instrumental reason, we are acutely responsible for the particular regional circumstance of which we are a part.

**7. Philosopher Albert Borgmann has called this book “eminently teachable,” what do you think he means by this?**

I think it has to do with the consistency and simplicity of the book’s structure, with a surprise at the end. Getting oriented to the argument is made simple because most chapters cover different ground with the same steps. This gives people a way in because they know what to expect but it is reflexive enough that the reader will be invited to consider carefully their own experiences, their unique encounters. Plus, we teachers and religious guides need to renew our intellectual dispositions if we are to provide directions of foresight for the future. Becoming a responsible thread in the fabric of culture is also exhilarating, especially when our every-day routines are examined in light of freedom and creativity.

An Excerpt from *Encounters in Thought: Beyond Instrumental Reason*

A focal practice, then, is something that does not “scatter our attention” nor “clutter our surroundings.” Thirty-five years later, the quality of our times must still be wrested from the digital landscapes that crowd our moments and often dictate our decisions. Intentional reading interrupts and invites us to breathe easier. Reading is a cultural focal practice in renewal. For reading can always “clear a central place amid the clutter and distraction.” And, we need to teach and learn a reading that intends to prepare for an encounter with the book in a way that can be still enough to recognize the beginning, middle, and end of reading. To reassert reading’s focal character, its practical purpose of becoming mindful and attentive, to stop skimming and scanning and start encountering and exploring, we have to interrupt the digital pattern long enough to remember and renew the refreshing salience of solitude. Consider just now books or articles you have read in the past that remain clear in your memory. Why are they there? When you thought of the book, what was it that you recollected? An image of the book? An image from the book? A quote, the smell of the book, what was pressing or significant about the environment or the context in which you read the book? In what way was reading that book enjoyable, or a struggle? Did the book confuse you at points? How did you work your way through the confusion? All these questions are merely an amplification of what happens when we read: inner dialogue. Inner dialogue is natural with reading, for as Borgmann has said: “The reader’s world is diffuse and suggestive, while a virtual reality is definite and detailed.” In reading, we are inclined to a broad search; in the virtual world we are induced to scanning for particulars. In the encounter with openness we experience our own emptiness, and very often it is filled with a lively inner dialogue. Are we open to the strange, constrained, perplexed, and abstract voices in our heads? When we reject or silence these contradictions we tend to close off a possible trajectory for thought. But if our habit is to keep the voices in a fluid conversation, we are able to see the intricacies of structure and structural connections among competing patterns. This is so much more than possessing information. When we read slowly it is as if consciousness is a laboratory, with an emphasis on **laboratory**. When you have a question for an author, whom do you ask first? The author, who tends to be unavailable, or yourself? The point is that open interest in ideas begins as a conversation with yourself. It is as though there are a multiplicity of identities within when you engage in an inner dialogue via literate encounter. Inner dialogue is necessary for open thinkers if for no other reason than you articulate a variety of factors and even understandings in an effort to discern the best among them. An open reader is always asking questions; some the text can answer, and we read along searching. Some are constantly asked and the most credible answer can only come from within. But we have to remain open.

Praise for *Encounters in Thought: Beyond Instrumental Reason*

“In *Encounters in Thought: Beyond Instrumental Reason*, Aaron K. Kerr interrogates the effects of contemporary technological culture on how humans think. Stating that we have settled into a pattern of ‘thinking more and more about less and less,’ Kerr asks us to rinse our mind with genuine practices of openness, wonder, receptivity, and contemplation. Kerr provides a rigorous philosophical meditation on the significance of water to human life and an example of contemplative inquiry praxis.”

—Annette M. Holba, Plymouth State University

“We live in a time that’s alluring with its promises and uncertain with its prospects. We find ourselves floating in its currents. Aaron Kerr gently pulls us to firm ground, letting us see where the firm ground is flourishing and that there is a tradition of people who disclose to us the splendor of the simple. At the same time, Kerr’s book is clearly structured and eminently teachable.”

—Albert Borgmann, author of *Real American Ethics*

“In this wise, wide-ranging book, drawing on models as disparate as Anselm of Canterbury and Malcolm X, Aaron Kerr encourages us to move beyond the passivity of digital distractions and the narrowness of pragmatic, often exploitative technologism to develop a ‘synergy of mind and heart,’ to recover essential qualities of openness, wonder, receptivity, and contemplation that lead both to authentic personal integration and to creative engagement with the critical problems of our time. The invitation to accompany him on these challenging, exhilarating explorations is an opportunity not to be missed!”

—Patrick F. O’Connell, editor, *The Merton Seasonal*

