Living in Earnest: Kurt Keefner's Concrete Ethics:
Killing Cool: Fantasy vs. Reality in American Life. Wallkill Trail
Books, 2014.

Kurt Keefner's *Killing Cool: Fantasy vs. Reality in American Life* often feels like three books in one: a positive ethics of the good life, wrapped inside a psychological analysis of some common deviations from reality, wrapped inside a searching criticism of current American culture. Cutting to the core, this review focuses on the philosophical essence of Keefner's work, which he calls "concrete ethics" and characterizes as "an ethics that goes beyond general virtues and deals with the specific habits necessary to live the good life" (p. 5).

Keefner sets the context for his concrete ethics by observing that what is needed today is a philosophy for living in a market-based society (pp. 138-39). Older and other ways of life such as that of the starving artist, aristocratic patron, or spiritual hermit have been dissolved by the market into economic roles such as that of the creative entrepreneur, venture philanthropist, and freelance counselor. At least in the developed world, in some sense we are all middle-class capitalists now.

Unfortunately, traditional approaches to ethics provide little guidance for navigating this brave new world. At their best, they emphasize some of the virtues that are needed to live a good human life in any place and time. However, they were conceived before the centrality of one's vocation was recognized or when it was actively frowned upon (as in classical Greece). Even relatively recent philosophers whom Keefner cites, such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Ayn Rand, might have extolled the value of work,[1] but in their own lives were still lone writers with limited experience of the practical world.

In Keefner's view, the best strategy for living a good life in contemporary society is consciously to improve one's character and develop one's values in the wider context of a plan for doing something interesting and important with one's time and talents. Such a strategy involves and requires significant virtues: reasoned reflection, self-awareness, moral ambition, hard work, common sense, practicality, commitment to human relationships, compassion, earnestness, long-term thinking and acting, creativity, authenticity, energetic engagement with the world, and diligent realization of one's potential (pp. 130, 187, etc.).

Thus Keefner's concrete ethics is, at root, recognizably classical: it is an ethics of self-knowledge and self-realization. Indeed, his phrase "become

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[1] See my "Nietzsche, Rand, and the Ethics of the Great Task," *Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* 10, no. 2 (2009), pp. 329-42.

who you are" (p. 63), also quoted approvingly by Nietzsche, has its origin in a fragment of Pindar ("become what you are, having learned what that is"). Yet Keefner brings that ancient ethos into today's world by applying it to the practical challenges of living in a capitalist society.

One of the deepest challenges is that the market economy, at least as it has developed in America, usually goes hand in hand with a shallow consumerism and, all too often, a lowest-common-denominator culture. Keefner points out that these trends have been abetted by technology: first by radio, then by television, and more recently by the Internet. All of these technologies and their associated habits have contributed to a faster pace of human interaction, a less reflective approach to living, and, increasingly, a post-literate society in which individuals are easily manipulated by imagery, advertising, and propaganda of one form or another.

Crucially, these trends have led to a blurring of the lines between fantasy and reality. On Keefner's account, the resulting confusion runs in the direction not of considering stories as real, but of considering reality as a kind of story (p. 11). People whom he characterizes as "pretenders" feel the need to project a mood or style onto reality, their lives, and their interactions with other people. Whether they are "earthy" or "sweet" or "macho" or "cool" (etc.), they treat reality as an extension of the self, not as an independent realm of exploration and action. Importantly, they also treat other people as means to their emotional ends or even as sources of entertainment, not as fully human beings deserving of compassion, tolerance, and respect.

Leaving aside the possibility that some people by nature have a more earthy or sweet (or whatever) personality than others and therefore aren't pretending in the first place, Keefner counsels that the ultimate remedy for this fundamental confusion is captured by a principle that he borrows from Rand: the primacy of existence (pp. 223-30). Fittingly, he gives it a distinctively ethical slant by emphasizing the importance of going out to meet reality (including other people) on its own terms, and of gaining a true sense of self through active involvement in projects and relationships. What he calls "mature wonder" (pp. 62-64) is not just a feeling or an attitude, but a positive choice to perceive anew, to become aware of the world as it is, and to realize one's full potential.

Keefner melds the primacy of existence with two additional habits of thought and action: focusing (pp. 211-15) and centering (pp. 216-23). Focusing, a concept originated by philosopher Eugene Gendlin,[2] consists of coming to an explicit understanding of one's implicit impressions and thus enables one to comprehend one's emotional reactions and evaluations as authentic and serious indicators of one's values. Centering, a method of Keefner's own synthesis from several sources, helps one to become more deeply aware of and engaged with oneself, other people, and the world—not

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[2] Eugene T. Gendlin, *Focusing* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981).

in the passive sense of receptivity, but in the dynamic sense of causing oneself to be aware of and present in one's interactions.

These three primary habits of focusing, centering, and embracing reality provide, according to Keefner, a firm basis for living as a real self in the real world (p. 232) and for creating a life of substance over style; of being over seeming; and of personal excellence over the pursuit of power, charisma, or status (pp. 160-61).

Thus does Keefner invest what some might call an essentially bourgeois way of life with a kind of simple grandeur. The psychological needs for a sense of independence, self-worth, creativity, serenity, and even grace can be met without trying to be cool or exciting or superior, but by developing one's full humanity (p. 122) and tutoring one's innate desires into full maturity (pp. 91 and 97). Instead of sticking it to the bourgeoisie, Keefner counsels one to find what is valuable in the bourgeois way of life (p. 140) and to take advantage of the opportunities it affords.

However, his is not a creed of complacency. He gently exhorts the reader to do something interesting and important with one's life (p. 170), to build something of value (p. 141), to achieve a timeless quality in oneself and one's tastes (pp. 165 and 169). And he is not afraid to find fault with countless present-day phenomena that most people take for granted.

Naturally, it is an occupational hazard of the cultural critic that turning attention to the particulars of current movements in art, culture, and technology can alienate readers who do not share the critic's personal preferences. The author of *Killing Cool* is no exception in this regard. Rather than catalogue the points on which he and I diverge, I would suggest something of an antidote, both for the author and for his readers: becoming more philosophical.

Specifically, it seems to me that the author could have engaged more fully with past philosophers who have labored to develop secular foundations for living a good human life. To name a few: Aristotle on habits, reason, and practical wisdom; Epicurus on serenity and living without fear; Adam Smith on sympathy and compassion; Ralph Waldo Emerson on self-sufficiency and self-trust; Henry David Thoreau on earnestness and independence; Nietzsche on becoming who you are; Rand on purpose and productiveness; Pierre Hadot on philosophical practices.[3] Such engagement would lend a greater depth to

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[3] Both Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Eudemian Ethics* are of interest on these topics. The aspect of fearlessness is one that I worked to bring out in my Epicurean dialogue *Letters on Happiness* (Parker, CO: Monadnock Valley Press, 2013). Adam Smith's classic text on sympathy is found in the first section of his *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Ralph Waldo Emerson treats of self-sufficiency and self-trust in a number of essays, especially "Self-Reliance" and "The American Scholar." Although earnestness and independence are emphasized throughout Henry David Thoreau's works, I would single out *Walden*, *A Plea for Captain John Brown*, and his letters to Harrison Blake. Friedrich Nietzsche's deepest insights into the classical ideal of becoming what you are can be found in his *The Gay Science* and *Ecce Homo*. Purpose and productiveness are leitmotifs in Ayn Rand's moral philosophy, from her popular

the helpfully concrete observations and recommendations that Keefner provides throughout his analysis. One can hope that Keefner and likeminded individuals will follow this line of inquiry in future work. Until then, such a "path of greater resistance" (p. 121) is open to Keefner's readers, too.

Another potential point of integration with scholarly research is in the field of moral psychology. Keefner consistently argues that one's values need to be "discovered, chosen, and realized rationally" (p. 73). Furthermore, he sketches an intriguing account (pp. 102-5) of how "inborn hungers are the starting point for value formation," how such hungers and pleasures are incorporated into the reasons for action (often as motivating factors), and how a mature person forges long-term values (such as marriage and career) from the raw materials of more "primal" values that are pursued by children and even animals. Here too, engaging with the work of moral psychologists such as Lawrence Kohlberg[4] would help to further ground the discussion.

A third area of investigation is culture itself (understood most broadly not as high culture or even popular culture but as the folkways of a given people). Keefner writes as an American for an American audience, but American culture is an outlier in the world, even among its cousins in the Anglosphere.[5] The causes are tied up with family systems as well as the movement and shared experiences of peoples such as the Anglo-Saxons, the English, and the American colonists hundreds or even thousands of years ago. Here the work of historians and anthropologists such as David Hackett Fischer, Alan Macfarlane, and Emmanuel Todd is especially relevant.[6]

Finally, there is the question of the relative weighting of nature, nurture, and volition in forming personality and behavior. Various psychologists have independently discovered and consistently identified five primary factors in personality: openness to experience, conscientiousness,

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novels *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged* to her essay "The Objectivist Ethics" in Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness* (New York: New American Library, 1964). Pierre Hadot's reconstruction of philosophical practice as the bedrock of classical ethics is best presented in his *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2004).

[4] Lawrence Kohlberg, *The Philosophy of Moral Development* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981).

[5] An exploration of these differences from the perspective of social science research can be found in Joseph Henrich, Steven J. Heine, and Ara Norenzayan, "The Weirdest People in the World?" *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 33 (2010), pp. 61-135.

[6] See David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); and Alan Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1978). Although Emmanuel Todd's primary works have not yet been translated into English, a helpful introduction to some of his themes can be found in Chapter 3 of James C. Bennett and Michael Lotus, *America 3.0* (New York: Encounter Books, 2013).

extraversion, agreeableness, and emotional stability.[7] These factors have also been broken down into smaller facets such as, in the case of agreeableness, things like compassion, politeness, warmth, affection, gentleness, generosity, modesty, humility, sociability, patience, sympathy, and kindness. By contrast, the personality types that Keefner describes are perhaps painted with a broader brush, and it is not clear how well they align with the five-factor model (e.g., is someone whom Keefner would describe as "sweet" also someone who would rate highly on agreeableness?). If these personality types are strongly correlated with the five factors and their underlying facets, and if the latter are fairly heritable or manifest themselves very early in life,[8] then it might be difficult to claim that someone who is especially "sweet" is pretending to be that way. Yet for other patterns of behavior (say, being "cool"), pretending might be the primary path to becoming that way. The complexities and subtleties here are legion, but for that reason especially fascinating for those who are drawn to hard problems at the intersection between philosophy and reality.

These pointers to the scholarly literature might lead the reader to conclude that the matters under consideration are strictly academic. Far from it. Both the author of *Killing Cool* and the current reviewer work outside the universities. Although we and others like us can be excused for not having the time to focus full-time on scholarship, paradoxically we have greater intellectual freedom to raise questions and pursue lines of inquiry that a tenure committee might look upon unfavorably, and to explore their real-world implications. We are also perhaps better placed to help develop communities of philosophical practice, thus modernizing what the ancient schools of Platonism, Aristotelianism, Stoicism, and Epicureanism initiated over two thousand years ago (here again, see the work of Hadot).

Killing Cool has opened my mind to several intriguing avenues of investigation, as adumbrated above. Furthermore, I would submit that Keefner has created a valuable and broadly Aristotelian addition to solutions for the problem of living in today's world. In contrast to distant ideals such as Aristotle's great-souled man, Nietzsche's übermensch, or Rand's symbolic heroes,[9] Keefner paints the picture of a greatness that is attainable by normal people given the opportunities and constraints of present-day society (pp. 141

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[7] A fine overview is R. R. McCrae and O. P. John, "An Introduction to the Five-Factor Model and Its Applications," *Journal of Personality* 60 (1992), pp. 175–215.

[8] The granular facets are more predictive than the high-level factors; see, e.g., S. V. Paunonen and M. S. Ashton, "Big Five Factors and Facets and the Prediction of Behavior," *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology* 81 (2001), pp. 524–39. It would be interesting to explore how some of the broad-brush personality types could be constructed, as it were, from building blocks consisting of these facets.

[9] See my "Zamyatin and Rand," *Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* 4, no. 2 (2003), pp. 285-304.

and 230). That alone makes *Killing Cool* well worth reading and reflecting upon.

Peter Saint-Andre
Independent Scholar