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Roark's Integrity

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“. . . make your own adaptation of the Classic motive to the façade. . . .”

“No,” said Roark. . . .

“It’s sheer insanity,” Weidler moaned. “I want you. We want your building. You need the commission. Do you have to be quite so fanatical and selfless about it?” . . .

Roark smiled. He looked down at his drawings. . . . He said: “That was the most selfish thing you’ve ever seen a man do.” (196–98)

Since integrity is loyalty to one’s values, Roark is a perfect model of a man of integrity. His refusal of the Manhattan Bank Building commission on the Bank committee’s terms is a particularly dramatic illustration of his integrity: due to his desperate financial situation, not accepting this commission makes it necessary for him to close down his office and to become a manual laborer in a granite quarry, perhaps never again to work in the career he passionately loves. Because Roark is willing to pay this price instead of accepting a seemingly minor alteration to his design, many readers of *The Fountainhead* might wonder whether he is being foolishly obstinate and might be tempted to agree with Weidler’s assessment of his decision as “fanatical and selfless.” Roark’s rebuttal that he acts in his own interest may appear baffling.

Young readers of *The Fountainhead* are often confused about what exactly Roark gains by his refusal to compromise his convictions. As a veteran judge in the Ayn Rand Institute’s essay contest on *The Fountainhead* for high school students, I have read many essays that state or imply that Roark is a failure as an architect, as his high standards drive away potential clients, but that his compensation for adhering to his principles is a feeling of inner satisfaction. Even more knowledgeable students of Objectivism might accept to some extent the premise that life requires a trade-off between material success and spiritual fulfillment. Ayn Rand, however, rejects this premise, and so do her

heroes. The events of Roark's life provide evidence that integrity is the recipe for both spiritual and physical well-being.

The purpose of this chapter is to show that Roark's refusal to compromise is a matter of self-preservation. I will show why the gain from staying loyal to one's rational convictions is inestimably greater than the alleged gain derived from betraying them or from not having any, and indicate that there is no rivalry between material and spiritual success. In the process the uniquely Objectivist identification of the nature and value of integrity will come to light.

In order to understand why Roark is loath to compromise his convictions, it is imperative to grasp what he is fighting for and how his values differ from those of conventional people. Roark becomes an architect because he wants to build things of beauty and to create comfortable and convenient buildings. What Roark loves about his work is the design, the solving of structural problems. This is the standard directing the jobs he takes. He goes to work for Cameron in order to complete his education in architectural design. Later he takes a job with Snyte, even though he wouldn't see his buildings erected, because "he would be free to design as he wished and he would have the experience of solving actual problems" (104). Clients are only the means to Roark's ultimate end: erecting functional and beautiful buildings (26).

By contrast, other architects believe that an architect's ultimate goal is not to build but to uphold traditions and to kowtow to clients. Architects such as Francon and Holcombe venerate Classical and Renaissance building styles simply because they are traditional. Snyte's eclecticism of architectural styles does not stem from his judgment that his buildings would be better were he to adopt selected features from various eras, but from the wish to get as many clients as he can by catering to many tastes. A few architects reject traditional styles, though not because they have found a better way to build. For example, Gus Webb negates the conventional, whatever it happens to be—from structural principles whose validity accounts for their longevity to good manners. The architectural avant-garde declares war on standards as such.

Roark's focus in his career is on the work of designing buildings. The joy he derives from his career comes from his work done his way. The other architects' focus in their profession is not on building but on pleasing other people—or displeasing them, in the case of the avant-garde.

This difference in focus is not confined to the realm of earning a living. The same orientation guides each man in his private life. Roark wants to find a soulmate with whom he would have an ecstatic lifelong romance. For friends Roark seeks similar-

minded people whose company he could enjoy. At first glance, Roark's friends appear to have nothing in common. They range from a member of high society (Austen Heller) to a plain workman (Mike Donnigan), from one of the wealthiest men in America (Gail Wynand) to one of the poorest (Steven Mallory). What unites all these men is their professional competence and independent judgment. This is what attracts Roark to them. He seeks out a romantic partner and friends for his own enjoyment, rather than for show.

By contrast, the conventional men want the kind of spouse and friends whom their associates and society at large would expect and approve of, or whom they could manipulate for their own advancement. Keating gives up Catherine Halsey, the woman he loves, because his mother and society disapprove of her. Even though he fears Dominique, he seeks to marry her in order to advance in Francon's firm and because her beauty would make his colleagues jealous. Unlike Roark, Keating would never cultivate a friendship with a man like Mike Donnigan: Donnigan lacks wealth and prestige, has no connections of which Keating could take advantage, would not ask Keating for favors, and is contemptuous of Keating's incompetence and pretentiousness. Instead he cultivates friendships with men like Tim Davis, whom he does not respect and whom he chooses at the beginning of his career in order to take Davis's place in Francon's office. He derives little pleasure from the company of his friends, for he does not pick them for his own enjoyment. He marries Dominique not to be happy, but to garner the envy of other people.

What is the difference between Roark's values and the pursuits of second-handers? Roark is committed to identifying and embracing the things that would bring him happiness. Second-handers pursue what other people want them to pursue. Instead of identifying their own preferences, they sniff out other people's desires and imitate them. Imitation governs even their choice of housing and recreation. Keating wants to move to the country not because he would enjoy the quiet of the surroundings or the beauties of nature, but because "everybody that's anybody" lives in the country (423). He wants to take up horseback riding, even though he dislikes it, in order to imitate Gordon Prescott (423). The second-handers have no values of their own. They substitute mimicry for valuing. Because the purpose of their pursuits is not their own enjoyment, none of their pursuits genuinely matters to them.

This is the key to the difference between the depth of Roark's emotions and those of the second-handers. Roark loves the entire process of designing and erecting a building. He is hard at work at each of his construction sites. His joy in his work is visible

to everyone from his employees to his clients. What he feels for his work is “the combination of holy sacrament, Indian torture and sexual ecstasy” (252). Roark loves Dominique and so needs her as selfishly as he needs oxygen (376). He greatly respects his first employer and teacher Cameron. He loves Wynand as another self. Both his work and the special people in his life are profoundly important to him.

By contrast, Keating regards architecture as “a business like any other. . . . What’s so damn sacred about it?” (352). After Francon establishes his professional reputation, he never bothers to design another building. Instead he spends his time entertaining clients and basking in his colleagues’ admiration and envy. Clearly, what attracts the conventional architects to architecture is not the work. The design itself is for them simply an unpleasant chore. Despite being focused on other people, the second-handers do not love anyone. Emotions between spouses in the few conventional marriages presented in the novel are predominantly negative: Eve Layton despises her husband, Mitch; Keating fears Dominique; Ralston and Kiki Holcombe do not exchange a single affectionate word or gesture (254–65).

Roark is passionate; the second-handers do not care deeply about anything. The presence or absence of strong emotions stems from a person’s being value-oriented, or failing to be so. Roark has values of his own, which are intimately connected to his happiness. This is why he is unwilling to surrender them. The second-handers do not have any genuine values of their own, so they are not committed to any of their particular pursuits or pastimes. They willingly change their preferences—e.g., put up a modernistic building instead of a Classical one to please a client—because neither the former nor the latter selection is their own first-handed choice.

While readers of *The Fountainhead* admire Roark for remaining true to his values, some might be amazed that he is not tempted to compromise his principles, even when the stakes are high. The reason for Roark’s lack of temptation may be found in his explanation to Stanton’s Dean: “I have, let’s say, sixty years to live. Most of that time will be spent working. I’ve chosen the work I want to do. If I find no joy in it, then I’m only condemning myself to sixty years of torture. And I can find the joy only if I do my work in the best way possible to me” (24). Building Renaissance villas (a la Ralston Holcombe), Victorian mansions (a la Peter Keating), and skyscrapers that look like ancient Greek temples would be torture for Roark, because such buildings lack artistic integrity. Similarly Roark would derive no pleasure from having a showcase wife, a house to make the neighbors jealous, or membership in elite country clubs, for he considers such objects

and activities to be of no value to himself. He is not tempted to live like the others because he knows that he has nothing to gain by doing so.

Roark staunchly supports his convictions in the face of opposition. But the mere fact that a man refuses to yield is not yet proof that he has good reasons for standing his ground. Children often stubbornly cling to range-of-the-moment desires. How does Roark's resolve to uphold his principles at any price differ from childish obstinacy? To answer this question we need to look at the origin of his values. Roark does not adopt them at random.

In his work he wishes to erect the best buildings he can. In order to become a competent architect, Roark has to give a great deal of thought to what makes a building structurally and esthetically good. At age twenty-two, during his interview with Stanton's Dean, he explains to the Dean what is wrong with imitating traditions of the past (22–25). Roark's knowledge and argument are strikingly deep for a young person; they required years of concerted thinking. He identifies the correct architectural standard, "form follows function," and figures out how to achieve it. The same depth of thought characterizes Roark's approach to other issues. He thinks about what motivates people in their approaches to life and formulates what he calls the Principle Behind the Dean. This allows him to judge people well and to pick out the ones whom he can respect and love. Roark identifies what he wants and what makes these things objectively good. His values are products of his own judgment.

We can now fully answer the question that befuddles some readers of *The Fountainhead*: why does Roark not agree to the demands of the Manhattan Bank committee, perhaps risking never working as an architect again? To those who regard affixing a Classical façade onto a skyscraper as a matter of mere cosmetic detail, Roark's decision might indeed appear to be foolish obstinacy. However, what is actually at stake is something far greater. Because the purpose of a skyscraper is different from the purpose of an ancient Greek temple, its look should be different, too. Roark knows how to erect a functional and beautiful building. Agreeing to the Bank committee's demands to put a Classical façade on a skyscraper, when he knows that such construction is worthless, would be a declaration that his judgment is irrelevant, that it cannot distinguish truth from falsehood. Roark is not quibbling over unimportant detail but facing the choice to rely on or to negate his own mind. This is a fundamental choice. A reader must grasp this if he is to understand that Roark's refusal to compromise his principles is a matter of self-preservation.

A person would not be tempted to eat a mushroom he knew to be poisonous, because the consequences of ignoring his

judgment would be death. It is just as important for Roark not to jettison his convictions, for he knows that the result would be the kind of living death that second-handers experience.

This is why Roark is married to his ideals. His reasoned judgment is invested in his work. His independent thinking and evaluation are the cause of the passion he feels for all his values.

By contrast, Keating, Francon, Snyte, etc., compromise readily because they have no independent judgment.¹ They do not identify what makes a building sound, how to have a rewarding marriage or a stable friendship; instead they try to please other people. Thus they have no objective standards in their work or in their private lives. Because they have no standards, they are not committed to anything. If a person pursues a goal merely to impress the neighbors, his self is not invested in the pursuit. Hence he would lack the fire for it, which would sap his motivation to fight for it. Why fight for something if you do not know whether it is valuable or worthless? Independent judgment is a precondition both of having solid convictions and of the strength to defend them.

Roark fights for his values and eventually wins. He is acquitted in the Cortlandt trial and penetrates the barrier of professional opposition. But suppose that circumstances had turned against him and he had not broken through professionally? Even in such a case Roark would have been better off than Keating, Holcombe, Francon, Webb, et al., who are at the peak of their careers. Any enjoyment Roark has in life—from the challenge of solving architectural problems, to the rapture of his love affair with Dominique, to the hours he spends with his friends, to the pleasure he finds in contemplating a good work of art—stems from the conclusions of his mind. In a quarry or in jail, he would have something the second-handers could never have: the exercise of his own judgment, a correct identification of what success requires, genuine values, and consequently an efficacy at dealing with the world and a strong sense of self. Whether or not Roark succeeds at a particular endeavor, he has the roots of such success: his own reasoning mind. The riches and prestige of conventional architects are worthless without this foundation.

Roark has the preconditions of success, yet the conventional architects surpass him in wealth. So it may still seem as though life requires a trade-off between spiritual fulfillment and material success. By remaining true to his principles, however, Roark maximizes his chances of having material prosperity as well. To make his work remunerative, he needs to find people who recognize its value and are willing to hire him. For this to happen, it must be clear what sort of work Roark does, so that those who

value it would know that he provides it and could contract with him for his services.

He explains to Heller his strategy for acquiring clients: “What can I tell people in order to get commissions? I can only show my work. If they don’t hear that, they won’t hear anything I say. . . . I’m waiting [for my] kind of people. . . . There will be thousands passing by your house and by the gas station. If out of those thousands, one stops and sees it—that’s all I need” (159–60). His statement turns out to be prophetic. Roark gets his third commission, the Fargo store, after Fargo drives by the Gowan station and sees the Heller house, then bribes Heller’s cook to see its interior (167). Even after Roark is obliged to close his office due to lack of commissions, Enright hunts him down after Enright sees the Fargo store and Roark’s other buildings (219). He gets commissions for the Norris house, the Cord Building, the Aquitania Hotel, and Wynand’s private country residence as a result of these men seeing his previous buildings (308, 311–13, 517–18). The competence of his construction serves to advertise his services.

Because Roark has objective value to offer his clients, he benefits from those clients who can identify that value. Other people’s first-handed judgment is thus good for him. Kent Lansing states to Roark what he seeks in an architect: “I want a good hotel, and I have certain standards of what is good, and they’re my own, and you’re the one who can give me what I want” (313). Because Lansing is a man of independent judgment, he fights for Roark and eventually secures the Aquitania Hotel commission for him. As long as Roark is able to find enough clients of that type, he will prosper. That is why Roark seeks to convince, not to flatter or bully, appealing only to his potential clients’ reason instead of to their desires to impress their neighbors, and why he seeks only reason from them.

In order to attract his kind of client, it is in Roark’s interest not to compromise the purity of his work. Were he to jettison the principles of proper construction and esthetics, the clients who want functionality and beauty in their buildings—the only kind of clients who could make it possible for him to make a living by designing buildings the way he wants to—would pass him by. Compromising his artistic integrity would be utterly impractical.

This is also why the solid wall of opposition raised against him has no power to throttle his career. How much harm can Roark’s enemies cause him? At worst, the disapproval of the AGA, of the Wynand papers, and of Toohey would deter a great number of potential clients from seeking his services. But Roark would have nothing to gain from such clients anyway: those who regard the AGA, the Wynand papers, and Toohey as architectural

authorities do not exercise their own judgment, and therefore could not see the value that Roark has to offer. Were Roark to get their commissions, they would stop his work by involving him in endless debates trying to make him change his designs for invalid reasons or even bringing lawsuits against him, as the cases of the Sanborn House and the Stoddard Temple make clear (167–70, 38–40).² But not even Toohey's most concerted effort can drive away from Roark those clients who do think for themselves and who see the value of his services. Men of independent judgment, such as Heller, Enright, and Lansing, will seek him out, because Toohey's opinions have no power to sway them.

The only way in which Toohey et al. could destroy Roark would be by making it impossible for people to contract with Roark for his services, which could be accomplished only if they had the power of governmental decree behind them.³ But as long as men live in a free society, they can act on their judgment, and the machinations of such evil people as Toohey can have no long-lasting or fundamental effects. This is why Ayn Rand regards political freedom as an essential of human life. In a free society, she argues, a man's

success depends on the *objective* value of his work and on the rationality of those who recognize that value. When men are free to trade, with reason and reality as their only arbiter, when no man may use physical force to extort the consent of another, it is the best product and the best judgment that win in every field of human endeavor, and raise the standard of living.⁴

Roark's ultimate success is not due to Ayn Rand's fondness for her hero and happy endings. Rather it is the necessary outcome of Roark's allegiance to rational principles. Roark wishes to succeed, so he identifies the principles of action that lead to success and adheres to them, recognizing that betraying them would cause him to fail. Rand rejects all forms of the mind/body dichotomy, a view entrenched in the history of philosophy, that forces a man to choose between the necessities of self-esteem and material well-being. In a revolutionary identification, she argues that integrity is the allegiance to the only guide to success of both mind and body.⁵

The real choice confronting Roark—and each of us—is: a fulfilling life of spiritual and material values versus an existence characterized by emptiness, boredom, and self-invisibility. Integrity, one's loyalty to rational principles, is the means of gaining the former. The man who understands this would not be

tempted to stray from his convictions, because there are no values of any kind to be gained by it.⁶

NOTES

1. Some readers may wonder if Holcombe, who refuses to build in any other style but Renaissance (114), has integrity. His preference for this style, however, is merely stubborn adherence to a certain tradition, not the result of independent judgment.

2. Roark's client for the Sanborn house, Mr. Sanborn, is a man of independent judgment. The trouble comes from his wife, who wishes to impress her neighbors.

3. If Toohey had been commissar in charge of building with absolute political power to determine which architects were allowed to design what buildings, Roark would have been a tragic hero, like Edmund Rostand's Cyrano de Bergerac or Ayn Rand's Kira Argounova. He would have failed to achieve his values existentially but kept his integrity intact.

4. Ayn Rand, *For the New Intellectual* (New York: New American Library, 1961), 26.

5. For an excellent discussion of the virtue of integrity and of the practicality of virtue, see Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* (New York: Dutton, 1993), 259–67 and 326–35.

6. I wish to thank Tore Boeckmann and Robert Mayhew for their comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.