A Psychobiography of Howard Roark:  
A Philosophy Made Flesh

Personal beliefs and values certainly make up an integral part of who an individual is. The cognitive psychologist George Kelly (1963) once said, “If we examine a person’s philosophy closely, we find ourselves staring at the person himself” (p. 16). Here, Kelly wished to emphasize how much an individual’s personal belief system influences their character and behavior. To take this to an extreme, we might ask, what if a person’s whole constitution was that of a philosophical idea? How could we describe a person whose whole being was a manifest belief system? Could we conceive such a person as being real?

Howard Roark, the protagonist of Ayn Rand’s novel The Fountainhead, is such an individual. Brilliant, young, passionate, and cold, Roark is a philosophical idea turned into a physical character. For in writing The Fountainhead, Ayn Rand created Roark as the human image of perfection according to her philosophy of Objectivism. This philosophy asserts that the moral purpose of human life is the pursuit of one’s own happiness and rational self-interest. Thus, Roark is inherently selfish, entirely ignorant of others, and passionately devoted to his own achievement and well-being.

Rand’s purpose in creating Roark is clear: to convey her philosophy through its manifestation in the personality of a single individual. In this paper, I will construct a psychological analysis of Roark according to the Big Five personality scheme and the ideas of certain trait theorists, reflecting on how these traits manifest the values of Objectivism. Ultimately, I will analyze whether personality trait theory would find him a realistic human being.

In order to conduct an analysis of the Howard Roark’s character in relationship to the philosophy he embodies, it is necessary to provide a brief summary of the core principles of Ayn Rand’s
Objectivism. First, Rand puts forth a metaphysical philosophy that “[r]eality exists as an objective absolute – facts are facts, regardless of man’s feelings, wishes, hopes, or fears” (Introducing Objectivism). Most persons would easily agree with Rand in this statement. However, in saying this, she wishes to emphasize her rejection of any belief in the supernatural, which she finds is the human’s “creation” of reality rather than his real acceptance of it (Rand, Essentials of Objectivism). Second, Rand describes the nature of the human as a “being of volitional consciousness.” By this, she means that reason is the human’s only epistemological device – feelings and faith have no place in the role of perception in gaining knowledge – and that the human’s spirit or soul resides in his possession of free will (Rand, Essentials of Objectivism). Perhaps most important to this essay are Rand’s ethical beliefs. Objectivism adheres strictly to the path of rational self-interest, that it is to the benefit of every human to seek his own pursuits alone. Rand doesn’t believe that a person should in any way sacrifice others for himself, but she rejects any form of moral altruism (Rand, Essentials of Objectivism).

The Fountainhead is the story of an individual’s struggle against societal norms and constraints to attain personal achievement. Set in the early 1920’s of East Coast America, the plot can be summarized as follows. The novel starts as the young Howard Roark drops out of architecture school for refusing to conform to the artistic styles of his teachers. Throughout the novel, Roark’s success oscillates between the designing of several large buildings and slowly dwindling business, at one point resulting in the closure of his firm. Roark acquires a few passionate admirers but many more enemies, who hate him for his selfishness and talent. Towards the end of the story, Roark designs a large housing complex but then discovers his plans have been altered in construction. Rather than see his plans be imperfected, he blows up the building. For this, Roark is arrested and goes on trial. But just when his case seems doomed, he is acquitted after rousing the courtroom with a speech on the virtue of selfishness, conveying Ayn Rand’s philosophy. The novel ends with Roark ascending the construction of a skyscraper he designed himself, a final triumphant picture of his individual glory.
At all points in the story, Roark demonstrates a general disposition towards introversion (low E). Roark is not necessarily bothered by the presence of others, but he does not often seek out human interaction for its own sake. The novel begins with Roark roaming about in a forest. He reports that out there he enjoys the ability to exercise his freedom, “to be alone and alive” (Rand, 1993, p. 16). When he is studying at architecture school, he never develops any friendships with his peers. When the dean of his school questions Roark about his future, he questions him about his family, but Roark says he doesn’t think he has any relatives, but honestly cannot recall (p. 25). For a person to have so little regard for social or familial relationships exhibits the near opposite of gregariousness. In fact, a repeated theme of Roark’s social interactions is his perceived “coldness” towards others. Rand often writes that when engaging with another, Roark doesn’t even see the person, as if they were of so little importance to him that they didn’t exist (p. 17).

Yet, one specific scene in the novel reveals a great deal more about Roark’s sociability. When business at his architectural firm begins to dwindle, a friend questions Roark as to why he doesn’t seek out clients for business. Roark replies that he simply lacks the mental organ required to work with the kind of people who require “handling.” He also says that he is waiting for “my kind of people” (p. 159). Thus, Roark does have social capacities, but they are limited to persons who fit his specific criteria.

Furthermore, Roark’s sociability is limited to a few very close friendships with those who are like him. Roark develops close friendships with his various clients and coworkers, like Gail Wynand, Henry Cameron, and Mike Donnigan, who aspire to be like him. Additionally, Roark has a rather complicated romantic relationship with a woman named Dominique Francon. Roark certainly derives pleasure in being with Dominique, but this is preceded by his agreement with her beliefs and virtues. Roark eventually marries Dominique, but while they are still in love, she betrays Roark in marrying to others.
close to him. Even in the midst of these actions, Roark expresses his real love and need for Dominique in his life (p. 376).

Additionally, Rand describes Roark’s inner happiness,

“His feeling is a steady, unruffled flame deep and hidden, a profound joy of living and of knowing his power, a joy that is not even conscious of being joy, because it is so steady, natural and unchangeable…” (p. 698).

Such positive affect would be much more characteristic of an extrovert. However, we should inquire into the source from which Roark derives his happiness. For Carl Jung writes that the difference between extroversion and introversion is whether a person derives energy from the social environment or himself. At the same time, Objectivism sets forth that the act of loving another is simply to love that part of them which resembles oneself. Seeing that Roark is the embodiment of this philosophy, it is clear that even when Roark derives energy from others, this is only a form of self-love by means of other persons. Thus, while Roark does demonstrate certain characteristics of an extrovert, such as positive affect and some seeking of outer stimulation, these characteristics are simply different manifestations of his introverted nature.

As Roark’s life progresses, he demonstrates a very conscientious personality (extremely high C). After leaving architecture school, he finds work at various architectural firms as a draftsman. Eventually, he works for Henry Cameron, a washed-up, so-called “modernist” architect who becomes his mentor. When Cameron retires, Roark has enough money to start his own firm. In each of these settings, Roark exhibits an absolute devotion and integrity in all his work. Even when Roark is forced to close his firm due to a lack of business, he goes to work at a granite quarry and finds pleasure in the back-breaking work of that job. He loves the feeling of being totally and completely exhausted after a long day’s work spent drilling in the quarry. Wherever he is, Roark works nights, weekends, holidays, whatever it takes to get the job done and done well. During one designing project, Rand describes Roark’s creative process as such:
"His fingertips were pressed to the paper, as if the paper had held them, as a surface charged with electricity will hold the flesh of a man who has brushed against it, hold and hurt" (p. 103).

Clearly, Roark has a very intimate connection with each of the buildings he creates. He sees them as extensions of his own self. His work is his life.

However, in contrast to research on what is typical of a conscientious person, Roark engages in repeated acts which go against societal morals and traditions. As mentioned, he drops out of school for refusing to conform to the artistic styles of his teachers. His tendency to disregard the styles of his age gets him fired from various drafting jobs and causes his firm to lose a great deal of business. In an extreme case, when his plans for a certain housing project are altered, he blows up the building. In light of such actions, one might characterize Roark as low in C for acting against the principles of his society.

Yet, it is not so much that Roark is acting rebelliously against the values of society, as he is acting devotedly for his own values. At one point, a committee who commissioned Roark to design their new office building disagrees with Roark’s plans on the building’s façade. They request a more Classical style of entrance in contrast to Roark’s personal design. In his defense, Roark gives an explanation as to why the Classical style would not work and how it would go against the “honesty,” “integrity,” and “faith” of the building (196). As this situation shows, Roark’s acts of supposed rebellion are really the actions necessary to fulfill his dedication and integrity to his own ideas. Similar to his trait of introversion, what guides Roark’s conscientiousness is his devotion to his own interests and ideas. For in both traits, we can see Objectivism’s value of selfishness as leading Roark to engage only in those social relationships and values which fit with his principles.

Within the trait of conscientiousness, we can also observe Roark as being extremely high in the facet of deliberation. While the circumstances of his life are often out of his control, such as the place of his vocation and the success of his firm, he thinks through every step as it comes. Nowhere in the novel does he commit an action out of a whim. In fact, his architectural critics charge him with disregarding “the human element of emotion” in favor of his dedication to “cold logic” (p. 196). This facet of
deliberation clearly evokes Objectivism’s value of rational judgment as the human’s primary means of understanding. Even while Roark’s principles might be extreme, Rand wants to demonstrate that what he does is in fact the most reasonable path of human existence.

Many of the aspects which make Roark highly conscientious also work integrally with his trait of *low openness to experience* (low O). For he neglects seeking a depth and variety of experiences for the same reason as why he refuses to engage it the artistic styles of others: his dedication to own style and values. To demonstrate, Roark describes his own architecture as such:

“A building is alive, like a man. Its integrity is to follow its own truth, its one single theme, and to serve its own single purpose. A man doesn’t borrow pieces of its body. A building doesn’t borrow hunks of its soul. Its maker gives it the soul and every wall, window and stairway to express it” (p. 24).

Here, we see that indeed Roark does seek to be creative and intellectual, which are characteristic of someone who is more open, but he does so only within his own principles and beliefs, narrowly limiting his originality. This often causes Roark to lose business because he refuses to listen to his clients’ hopes and ideas for their own buildings. However, both Roark and Rand are convinced that Roark’s talent and genius as an architect necessitate that he always knows better than his clients as to what they really need and want. Constructive criticism is just not a concept of his world. And so, Roark adheres strictly to the creative style of his own originality. Roark simply will not allow himself to be taught by the outside world because such would be a transgression of his own integrity.

Confirming his low openness, Roark is also extremely low in absorption. Absorption constitutes a tendency to experience emotional and cognitive changes across a variety of situations. Further, absorption is associated with an intense and vivid fantasy life. But for Roark, this simply isn’t the case. As the embodiment of Objectivism, neither his values nor his personality can allow it. “[W]ishes, hopes, and fears” are not an appropriate means of approaching reality (Introducing Objectivism). Thus, Roark’s attention is always devoted to real activities and goals which pertain to present reality.
An account of Roark’s trait of *agreeableness* is a bit more complex. Overall, he is low in agreeableness (low O), but this conclusion can only be drawn after some major fleshing out of the material. Firstly, Roark’s sociability demonstrates that he should be the exact opposite of those aspects of agreeableness which connote benevolence towards others. Throughout the novel, Roark displays no direct sympathy towards others. Rather, he expends all his efforts on his personal achievements, without even thinking about concepts like care and altruism. In her preliminary notes for the novel, Rand writes,

“My purpose, first cause and prime mover is the portrayal of Howard Roark... *as an end in himself* – not as a means to any further end” (Ayn Rand Institute).

In accordance with the ethics of Objectivism, Rand wishes to demonstrate Roark’s true virtue in selfishness that has nothing to do with altruistic tendencies. Roark seeks only those things which fulfill him as an “end in himself.”

Yet, a couple situations might demonstrate Roark exhibiting prosocial behavior. First, Peter Keating, a friend from architectural school, repeatedly goes to Roark for help with his building designs. Roark helps him in straightening out his mangled floor plans. Second, when Henry Cameron, Roark’s previous employer and mentor, grows old, Roark goes to visit him. Rand doesn’t clearly express Roark’s motives in helping either of these individuals, but we may theorize that in either situation Roark receives some personal benefit. Such would negate the possibility of altruistic motives that would be in contradiction to Objectivism.

In the case of Peter, we might suggest that while Roark cannot claim true ownership of the projects with which he helps Peter, we might say that Roark, as a conscientious individual, does derive pleasure from the mere activity of working on the architecture.

For the second situation, we might look to a piece of Rand’s (1964) philosophy on love:
“Love, friendship, respect, admiration are the emotional response of one man to the virtues of another, the spiritual payment given in exchange for the personal selfish pleasure which one man derives from the virtues of another man’s character” (p. 31).

Here, Rand expresses that there do exist certain situations in which one feels compelled to assist another in some way that one does not acquire direct personal benefit. However, even in these situations, a person does derive some personal pleasure from the mere existence of another’s virtues. And so, according to Rand’s view, Roark’s act of helping Cameron is only payment for his previously received pleasure. Yet, from the standpoint of the trait theorist, a simple assessment of altruism would seem much more likely. Thus, regarding the motive behind Roark’s behavior, we see a tension between the trait theorist who would attest to some selflessness and the Objectivist who would ardently defend selfishness.

At the same time, however, Roark doesn’t fit with the category of those malevolent tendencies on the low end of the continuum of agreeableness, such as cruelty or antagonism. Before Roark blows up the housing project, he has Dominique lead the security guard away from the complex, ensuring the man’s safety. Therefore, we see that even in this extreme act, Roark was not seeking any harm to others, but to preserve the integrity of his idea by destroying it. Even when Roark is provoked, his stoic personality keeps him from reacting against others. Ellsworth Toohey, an famous architectural critic and philanthropist, represents Roark’s antithesis. Toohey absolutely despises Roark for his selfishness and creates elaborate schemes to destroy Roark’s reputation and diminish his success. Yet, at one chance encounter when Toohey and Roark meet, he asks Roark what he thinks of him. Roark simply replies, “But I don’t think of you” (p. 389). Clearly, Roark has no desire to harm others within his pursuits, nor does he even give any attention to those who seek his own harm. By demonstrating Roark’s lack of antisocial dispositions, Rand exhibits Objectivism’s principle of pursuing one’s good while allowing others to do the same.
Additionally, it is clear that Roark is a very high in the facet of modesty. Because Roark is so devoted to his own ideas and opinions about himself, he cares very little about the opinions of others. Thus, he has no need to boast about any of his achievements around others. Because he is the measure of his own accomplishments.

In the last moments of the novel, Roark goes through the process of his trial, which would represent a stressful experience to the average person. He is arrested by policemen, stays in prison for a few days, and must deliver his own speech in his defense. Yet, in the midst of these circumstances he remains impervious all negative affect, making him very low in neuroticism (extremely low N). Roark succeeds in persuading the jury to sentence him not guilty, and goes off free to pursue his career without downward pressure from society. In her notes on Roark’s character, Rand writes,

“He [Roark] does not suffer, because he does not believe in suffering. Defeat or disappointment are merely a part of the battle. Nothing can really touch him” (p. 698).

In describing Roark as a figure of perfection according to Objectivism, she demonstrates how his rationality wins out over his emotions.

There are but two short instances when Roark shows a touch of vulnerability to the outer world. The first comes when he is a worker in the granite quarry. Having had to close his firm and indefinitely give up his architectural career, this stage represents his lowest point in the novel. Roark is able to perceive his momentary pain and agony from an objective standpoint and determines that he must blast through this part of him which calls for pity (p. 203).

The other occurs when Dominique announces to Roark that she will be marry Peter. Because of his deep love for Dominique, this is understandably devastating to Roark:

“In his face she saw suffering that was made old, as if it had been a part of him for a long time, because it was accepted, and it looked not like a wound, but a scar” (p. 376).

He assures Dominique that by holding fast to their convictions and strength, they will not be destroyed by the world they fight against, but triumph over it (p. 377).
In both instances, Rand wishes to demonstrate such brief moments of negative affect in Roark so that he would be realistic and relatable to the reader. At the end of both moments, Roark makes clear that his emotions will not control him, that Objective reason wins out over any neurotic tendencies.

Across all his traits, selfishness seems to be a key component in shaping Roark’s personality. Roark’s introversion derives from his disposition to receive energy from himself. Similarly, his social engagements are chosen so that he receives benefit. Roark’s absolute devotion and integrity to his selfish ideals bring about his conscientiousness. Roark refuses to be open to experience out of his desire for originality. His lack of agreeableness derives from his focus on his selfish pursuits and tendency to help others only when some personal benefit is involved. Lastly, he chooses to fight over his negative emotions in order to exalt himself in becoming superior to them. Indeed, selfishness seems to represent a cardinal disposition of Roark’s character. Since it is perhaps the most important aspect of Objectivist philosophy, Rand goes to great lengths to construct Roark’s personality such that selfishness permeates all aspects of his character.

Similarly, it has been shown how Roark embodies the other principles of Objectivism, including dependence on reason for epistemology. However, while Roark’s character matches the values of Objectivism, a further question should be asked as to whether Roark’s personality matches reality.

In light of the Big Five trait theory, Roark might be less conceivable. The basic construction of the Big Five schema is the aggregation of smaller traits which have been shown to cling together. These smaller traits represent the facets that come together to make up the larger traits. However, Roark’s personality seems defy some of these tendencies. Within the trait of extroversion he is extremely low in the facet of warmth and gregariousness, yet extremely high in the facets of positive emotions and assertiveness. Within the trait of agreeableness, he is extremely low in the facets of altruism and
tender-mindedness, but very high in the facet of modesty. Because of such large dichotomies within the
given traits, traits theorists might find him an unlikely candidate. While this may be true, Ayn Rand
might concur with these theorists in saying that such human excellence is indeed quite rare. As the
embodiment of her philosophy of Objectivism, Howard Roark represented all that the human can and
should be. Necessarily, such a high moral and intellectual standard should make him much less likely to
occur. Yet, for Rand this made him no less noble and idea to be aspired to among all men and women.
Reference List


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