



Yes I Can

6

By: David Henderson
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“Do you mean to tell me that you’re thinking seriously of building that way, when and if you are an architect?”

“Yes.”

“My dear fellow, who will let you?”

“That’s not the point. The point is, who will stop me?”

This is one of my favorite passages from Ayn Rand’s *The Fountainhead*. The conversation takes place early in the novel. It’s between the Dean of the architecture school and budding architect Howard Roark. The Dean wonders how Roark will survive in the architecture world, given Roark’s unusual approach to each design. Roark has no such worry.

I thought of this when I was engaged in a discussion on Facebook last week. Someone had pointed to a “politically incorrect” movie and said that such a movie “couldn’t be made today.” If he had said “almost certainly wouldn’t be made today,” I would have agreed. But I disagreed that it *couldn’t* be made today.

It’s true that the knives would be out for whoever made the movie and, knowing that, many potential funders would be scared off. But all funders? I think that’s unlikely.

How about actors? The prominent actors are like NBA players: they’re the best of the best. But go down a notch and you can probably find some very good actors who are at least 80% as good as the top actors and who would gladly work for 20% of the pay of the top actors.

In Charley Hooper’s and my book, *Making Great Decisions in Business and Life*, we discuss a similar issue, the issue of whether you have to do something. You typically don’t.

Under the subtitle “I Must”, we write:

Another way many of us think unclearly is by going through life with a list of made-up obligations. We wake up in the morning with a long list of “must do” items. After a while, our feet start dragging and we feel a heavy burden on our shoulders. But we “must” press on. Such phony obligations get in the way of clear thinking.

There is very little in the world that we actually must do. Let's face it, unless we are in jail or otherwise detained, we have complete freedom about how to spend our day. The reason we don't just pack up and go sit on the beach every day is that our actions lead to outcomes—and many of our “have to's” give us the outcomes we want. Going to work, for example, provides camaraderie and a feeling of importance, as well as the money to buy the things we need and want. The “I must” person tells himself that he must go to work. The clear-thinking person says, “If I work at this job for another year, I'll be able to buy a house. I could quit my job today, but if I want that house a lot, I'd better show up for work on Monday morning.”

The “I must” attitude increases our burdens and lessens our humanity. When we have goals in mind, we should reframe the issue from “I must” to “I want.” I want to go to work so that I can feed my kids, buy a car, buy a house, or change the world. If my goals don't seem to justify the effort, then maybe I should rethink my goals and my overall strategy. When we act with clarity of mind, we cease being a fake prisoner and realize our true freedom. For more on this, see David Kelley's powerful essay “[I Don't Have to.](#)“

Back to the idea that something can't be done. There are, of course, certain things *I* can't do. I can't become a player in the NBA, for example. But many people can become players in the NBA.

Similarly, there are qualified people who can make a politically incorrect movie. They may choose not to and their choice may be wise, given their other preferences and constraints. But that's very different from saying they can't.

When I was in my late 20s, I expressed to my friend Roy Childs that I was feeling discouraged by the economics profession's narrow view of what was considered publishable research. I told him I couldn't publish what I wanted. He said I could. It's just that I probably couldn't publish it *where* I wanted.

That simple insight lifted a burden. I had been focusing on the “I Have To's” and forgetting that I didn't have to. That conversation, plus a few others, led me to leave a good well-paying tenure-track position at the University of Rochester and to work at the Cato Institute in 1979.

I'm publishing what I want.