

Personality Theories

ROLLO MAY

1909 - 1994

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In Ukrainian: [Ролло Мей](#) (translated by Anna Matesh)

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Biography

Rollo May was born April 21, 1909, in Ada, Ohio. His childhood was not particularly pleasant: His parents didn't get along and eventually divorced, and his sister had a psychotic breakdown.

After a brief stint at Michigan State (he was asked to leave because of his involvement with a radical student magazine), he attended Oberlin College in Ohio, where he received his bachelors degree.

After graduation, he went to Greece, where he taught English at Anatolia College for three years. During this period, he also spent time as an itinerant artist and even studied briefly with Alfred Adler.

When he returned to the US, he entered Union Theological Seminary and became friends with one of his teachers, Paul Tillich, the existentialist theologian, who would have a profound effect on his thinking. May received his BD in 1938.

May suffered from tuberculosis, and had to spend three years in a sanatorium. This was probably the turning point of his life. While he faced the possibility of death, he also filled his empty hours with reading. Among the literature he read were the writings of Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish religious writer who inspired much of the existential movement, and provided the inspiration for May's theory.



He went on to study psychoanalysis at White Institute, where he met people such as Harry Stack Sullivan and Erich Fromm. And finally, he went to Columbia University in New York, where in 1949 he received the first PhD in clinical psychology that institution ever awarded.

After receiving his PhD, he went on to teach at a variety of top schools. In 1958, he edited, with Ernest Angel and Henri Ellenberger, the book *Existence*, which introduced existential psychology to the US. He spent the last years of his life in Tiburon, California, until he died in October

of 1994.

Theory

Rollo May is the best known American existential psychologist. Much of his thinking can be understood by reading about existentialism in general, and the overlap between his ideas and the ideas of Ludwig Binswanger is great. Nevertheless, he is a little off of the mainstream in that he was more influenced by American humanism than the Europeans, and more interested in reconciling existential psychology with other approaches, especially Freud's.

May uses some traditional existential terms slightly differently than others, and invents new words for some of existentialism's old ideas. **Destiny**, for example, is roughly the same as thrownness combined with fallenness. It is that part of our lives that is determined for us, our raw materials, if you like, for the project of creating our lives. Another example is the word **courage**, which he uses more often than the traditional term "authenticity" to mean facing one's anxiety and rising above it.

He is also the only existential psychologist I'm aware of who discusses certain "stages" (not in the strict Freudian sense, of course) of development:

Innocence -- the pre-egoic, pre-self-conscious stage of the infant. The innocent is premoral, i.e. is neither bad nor good. Like a wild animal who kills to eat, the innocent is only doing what he or she must do. But an innocent does have a degree of will in the sense of a drive to fulfil their needs!

Rebellion -- the childhood and adolescent stage of developing one's ego or self-consciousness by means of contrast with adults, from the "no" of the two year old to the "no way" of the teenager. The rebellious person wants freedom, but has as yet no full understanding of the responsibility that goes with it. The teenager may want to spend their allowance in any way they choose -- yet they still expect the parent to provide the money, and will complain about unfairness if they don't get it!

Ordinary -- the normal adult ego, conventional and a little boring, perhaps. They have learned responsibility, but find it too demanding, and so seek refuge in conformity and traditional values.

Creative -- the authentic adult, the existential stage, beyond ego and self-actualizing. This is the person who, accepting destiny, faces anxiety with courage!

These are not stages in the traditional sense. A child may certainly be innocent, ordinary or creative at times; An adult may be rebellious. The only attachments to certain ages is in terms of salience: Rebelliousness stands out in the two year old and the teenager!

On the other hand, he is every bit as interested in **anxiety** as any existentialist. His first book, *The Meaning of Anxiety*, was based on his doctoral dissertation, which in turn was based on his reading of Kierkegaard. His definition of anxiety is "the apprehension cued off by a threat to some value which the individual holds essential to his existence as a self" (1967, p. 72). While not "pure" existentialism, it does obviously include fear of death or "nothingness." Later, he quotes Kierkegaard: "Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom."

Love and Will

Many of May's unique ideas can be found in the book I consider his best, *Love and Will*. In his efforts at reconciling Freud and the existentialists, he turns his attention to motivation. His basic motivational construct is **the daimonic**. The daimonic is the entire system of motives, different for each individual. It is composed of a collection of specific motives called **daimons**.

The word daimon is from the Greek, and means little god. It comes to us as demon, with a very negative connotation. But originally, a daimon could be bad or good. Daimons include lower needs, such as food and sex, as well as higher needs, such as love. Basically, he says, a daimon is anything that can

take over the person, a situation he refers to as **daimonic possession**. It is then, when the balance among daimons is disrupted, that they should be considered “evil” -- as the phrase implies! This idea is similar to Binswanger's idea of themes, or Horney's idea of coping strategies.

For May, one of the most important daimons is **eros**. Eros is love (not sex), and in Greek mythology was a minor god pictured as a young man. (See the story of Eros and Psyche by [clicking here!](#)) Later, Eros would be transformed into that annoying little pest, Cupid. May understood love as the need we have to “become one” with another person, and refers to an ancient Greek story by Aristophanes: People were originally four-legged, four-armed, two-headed creatures. When we became a little too prideful, the gods split us in two, male and female, and cursed us with the never-ending desire to recover our missing half!

Anyway, like any daimon, eros is a good thing until it takes over the personality, until we become obsessed with it.

Another important concept for May is **will**: The ability to organize oneself in order to achieve one's goals. This makes will roughly synonymous with ego and reality-testing, but with its own store of energy, as in ego psychology. I suspect he got the notion from Otto Rank, who uses will in the same way. May hints that will, too, is a daimon that can potentially take over the person.

Another definition of will is “the ability to make **wishes** come true.” Wishes are “playful imaginings of possibilities,” and are manifestations of our daimons. Many wishes, of course, come from eros. But they require will to make them happen! Hence, we can see three “personality types” coming out of our relative supply, you might say, of our wishes for love and the will to realize them. Note that he doesn't actually come out and name them -- that would be too categorical for an existentialist -- and they are not either-or pigeon holes by any means. But he does use various terms to refer to them, and I have picked representative ones.

There is the type he refers to as “**neo-Puritan**,” who is all will, but no love. They have amazing self-discipline, and can “make things happen”... but they have no wishes to act upon. So they become “anal” and perfectionistic, but empty and “dried-up.” The archetypal example is Ebenezer Scrooge.

The second type he refers to as “**infantile.**” They are all wishes but no will. Filled with dreams and desires, they don’t have the self-discipline to make anything of their dreams and desires, and so become dependent and conformist. They love, but their love means little. Perhaps Homer Simpson is the clearest example!

The last type is the “**creative**” type. May recommends, wisely, that we should cultivate a balance of these two aspects of our personalities. He said “Man’s task is to unite love and will.” This idea is, in fact, an old one that we find among quite a few theorists. Otto Rank, for example, makes the same contrast with death (which includes both our need for others and our fear of life) and life (which includes both our need for autonomy and our fear of loneliness). Other theorists have talked about communion and agency, homonymy and autonomy, nurturance and assertiveness, affiliation and achievement, and so on.

Myths

May’s last book was ***The Cry for Myth.*** He pointed out that a big problem in the twentieth century was our loss of values. All the different values around us lead us to doubt all values. As Nietzsche pointed out, if God is dead (i.e. absolutes are gone), then anything is permitted!

May says we have to create our own values, each of us individually. This, of course, is difficult to say the least. So we need help, not forced on us, but “offered up” for us to use as we will.

Enter **myths**, stories that help us to “make sense” out of our lives, “guiding narratives.” They resemble to some extent Jung’s archetypes, but they can be conscious and unconscious, collective and personal. A good example is how many people live their lives based on stories from the Bible.

Other examples you may be familiar with include Horatio Alger, Oedipus Rex, Sisyphus, Romeo and Juliet, Casablanca, Leave it to Beaver, Star Wars, Little House on the Prairie, The Simpsons, South Park, and the fables of Aesop. As I intentionally suggest with this list, a lot of stories make lousy myths. Many stories emphasize the magical granting of one’s wishes (infantile). Others promise success in exchange for hard work and self-sacrifice (neo-Puritan). Many of our stories today say that valuelessness is itself the best value! Instead, says May, we should be actively working to create new myths that

support people's efforts at making the best of life, instead of undermining them!

The idea sounds good -- but it isn't terribly existential! Most existentialists feel that it is necessary to face reality much more directly than "myths" imply. In fact, they sound a little too much like what the great mass of people succumb to as a part of fallenness, conventionality, and inauthenticity! A controversy for the future....

Readings

May writes very well and all his books are quite readable. His first was *The Meaning of Anxiety* (1950). General overviews include *Man's Search for Himself* (1953), *Psychology and the Human Dilemma* (1967), and *The Discovery of Being* (1983). Strongly recommended are *Love and Will* (1969) and *The Cry for Myth* (1991). There are quite a few others!

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