

# MAY, ROLLO

Authored by  
**Mohammed looti**

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Rollo May

## The Core Definition of Rollo May's Existential Psychology

**Rollo May** (1909-1994) was a highly influential American existential psychologist, widely recognized for his profound contributions to the understanding of the human condition, particularly through the lenses of anxiety, freedom, responsibility, and the search for meaning. His work stands as a critical bridge between traditional psychoanalytic thought and the burgeoning humanistic movement of the mid-20th century, offering a unique perspective that integrated philosophical depth with clinical insight. May articulated that human beings are fundamentally free agents, constantly confronted with choices that define their existence, and that this freedom inherently brings with it a certain level of existential anxiety.

At the heart of May's philosophy is the key idea that individuals are not merely products of their environment or biological drives, but active participants in shaping their own reality. He championed the concept of "being-in-the-world" (Dasein), emphasizing the inseparable connection between a person and their context, and the continuous process of becoming. For May, authentic living involves confronting the inherent dilemmas of existence, such as death, isolation, meaninglessness, and freedom. This confrontation, though often uncomfortable, is deemed essential for psychological growth and the realization of one's full potential, moving beyond superficial existence to a life rich with purpose and genuine engagement.

May's approach diverged from purely deterministic views, asserting that human beings possess the capacity for self-awareness and self-transcendence. He posited that psychological health is not merely the absence of symptoms, but the courage to embrace life's inherent paradoxes and challenges. His exploration of concepts like `will`, `love`, and `intentionality` further enriched this perspective, portraying the human psyche as dynamic and striving, perpetually engaged in the task of creating meaning and making responsible choices in the face of an often indifferent universe. This emphasis on individual agency and the inherent struggles of existence forms the bedrock of his enduring legacy in psychological thought.

## Historical Context and Formative Influences

Rollo May's intellectual journey began in Ada, Ohio, in 1909, and was significantly shaped by his upbringing in the Appalachian Mountains, an environment that likely fostered a deep appreciation for the rugged independence and existential struggles of life. He pursued his undergraduate studies at Oberlin College in Ohio, a liberal arts institution known for its progressive ideals. His academic path culminated in a doctorate in psychology from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1940. This academic foundation, coupled with a keen interest in philosophy and theology (he initially studied theology and served as an itinerant artist), provided him with a broad

interdisciplinary lens through which to view human experience.

Following his doctoral work, May gained invaluable clinical experience as a psychotherapist at the Austen Riggs Center in Massachusetts, a prominent psychiatric hospital that encouraged innovative therapeutic approaches. It was during this period that May began to critically engage with prevailing psychoanalytic theories and integrate them with his burgeoning interest in existential philosophy. The post-World War II era presented a unique intellectual climate, characterized by widespread disillusionment and a profound questioning of traditional values and meanings. This societal context provided fertile ground for the emergence of existential thought, which sought to address the anxieties of a world grappling with the aftermath of immense suffering and the threat of nuclear annihilation.

May's intellectual development was deeply influenced by European existential philosophers such as Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre. He sought to translate their philosophical insights into a practical framework for understanding psychological distress and promoting human growth within a clinical setting. This synthesis of clinical practice and philosophical inquiry led him to develop his unique brand of existential psychology, emphasizing the individual's subjective experience, freedom, and responsibility, which stood in contrast to more deterministic or solely behavioral models of the time. His move to California later in his career, where he became a professor of psychology at the California School of Professional Psychology in Fresno, further solidified his role as a leading figure in this evolving field.

### Major Contributions: Anxiety, Love, and Will

Rollo May is perhaps best known for his seminal works, *The Meaning of Anxiety* (1950) and *Love and Will* (1969), which meticulously explored fundamental aspects of the human psyche. In *The Meaning of Anxiety*, May challenged the conventional Freudian view of anxiety as merely a neurotic symptom to be eradicated. Instead, he proposed that anxiety is a normal and indeed necessary component of human existence, an intrinsic response to the inherent uncertainties and freedom of life. He differentiated between "normal anxiety," which serves as a signal that one is confronting an existential challenge and can lead to growth, and "neurotic anxiety," which arises from an individual's attempt to avoid or repress normal anxiety, leading to constricted living and psychological distress.

May argued that embracing normal anxiety, rather than fleeing from it, can propel individuals toward making authentic choices and taking responsibility for their lives. He believed that the courage to face one's anxieties, to acknowledge the precariousness of existence, is a pathway to deeper self-awareness and personal development. This perspective offered a radical shift in how anxiety was understood in psychotherapy, moving it from being solely a pathology to also being a potential catalyst for self-realization. By confronting anxiety, individuals can engage more fully with

their freedom and cultivate a more meaningful existence.

Building upon these ideas, May's *Love and Will* delves into the intricate relationship between these two powerful human forces, asserting that the ability to exercise one's `will` is paramount to human existence and that `love` is a fundamental aspect of authentic living. He explored different forms of love (Eros, Philia, Agape, Sex) and their potential for both creativity and destruction, emphasizing that genuine love requires `will` and a responsible engagement with another person's being. May contended that the erosion of `will` in modern society leads to a sense of powerlessness and meaninglessness, and that reclaiming one's capacity for `will`--the ability to intend, decide, and act--is crucial for psychological health and the formation of meaningful relationships. His work profoundly shaped the understanding of these complex human experiences, demonstrating their interconnectedness and their central role in the journey toward self-actualization.

### **A Practical Example: Navigating a Career Crossroads**

To illustrate Rollo May's principles, consider the common real-world scenario of an individual, let's call her Sarah, who has been working in a stable but unfulfilling corporate job for several years. She feels a growing sense of emptiness and a yearning for a more meaningful career path, perhaps in a creative field, but the thought of leaving her secure position fills her with immense anxiety. This situation perfectly encapsulates the existential dilemma May described: the confrontation with freedom and responsibility, and the anxiety that arises from it. Sarah is at a crossroads, where the comfortable known meets the terrifying unknown, and her choices will profoundly shape her future.

Applying May's `how-to` approach, Sarah would first need to acknowledge and fully experience her anxiety, rather than suppressing it. She might feel a knot in her stomach, sleepless nights, or a pervasive sense of dread. Instead of dismissing these feelings as irrational, May would encourage her to see this normal anxiety as a signal that she is at a significant juncture, facing a genuine possibility for growth and a challenge to her existing self-definition. This anxiety is not pathological; it is an authentic response to her freedom to choose a new path and the inherent uncertainty of that choice. It signifies that she is confronting the boundaries of her comfortable existence and the potential for a more authentic self.

Next, Sarah would be encouraged to embrace her `freedom` and `responsibility`. This involves recognizing that no external force is compelling her to stay in her current job, nor is any external force dictating her new path. The choice is hers alone, and with that choice comes the full burden of responsibility for its outcome. She would engage her `will` by deliberately reflecting on her values, passions, and the kind of life she truly desires. This process might involve imagining her future self, considering the potential losses and gains, and consciously deciding to move towards a life more aligned with her deeper aspirations, despite the fear. By making an `authentic choice` and

committing to it, Sarah would be actively shaping her own being, thereby moving beyond a passive existence dictated by external expectations or fear, and stepping into a more empowered and meaningful life.

## Significance and Enduring Impact

Rollo May's contributions have had a profound and lasting significance in the field of psychology, particularly in shaping the landscape of modern psychotherapy and counseling. His existential framework offered a compelling alternative to purely mechanistic or purely deterministic views of human nature, reintroducing concepts of meaning, purpose, freedom, and responsibility into the therapeutic dialogue. He challenged therapists to look beyond symptoms and to engage with the deeper existential concerns that often underlie psychological distress, such as feelings of emptiness, isolation, and meaninglessness. This shift encouraged a more holistic and humanistic approach to treatment, focusing on the individual's subjective experience and their capacity for self-determination and growth.

The importance of May's work lies in its emphasis on the individual's courageous engagement with life's fundamental dilemmas. His ideas about `anxiety` as a catalyst for growth, and the centrality of `choice` and `will` in shaping one's destiny, have been integrated into various modern therapeutic approaches. Existential therapy, directly influenced by May, helps clients confront their anxieties, clarify their values, and make conscious, responsible choices that lead to a more authentic and fulfilling life. Beyond the clinical realm, his insights have also permeated fields such as education, leadership development, and personal coaching, where the emphasis on self-awareness, personal responsibility, and the pursuit of meaning resonates deeply.

May's work also played a crucial role in bringing European philosophical traditions, specifically `existentialism` and `phenomenology`, into American psychological discourse. By making these complex philosophical ideas accessible and clinically relevant, he broadened the scope of psychological inquiry and enriched our understanding of human experience. His legacy continues to inspire psychologists and philosophers alike to consider the deeper, often uncomfortable, questions about existence, freedom, and the inherent struggles of being human, urging individuals and society to live more thoughtfully and authentically.

## Connections and Relations to Broader Psychological Concepts

Rollo May's work is inextricably linked to several significant movements and concepts within psychology and philosophy. Most notably, he is a foundational figure in existential psychology, a subfield that emphasizes the human search for meaning, the experience of freedom and responsibility, and the confrontation with fundamental existential concerns such as death, isolation, and meaninglessness. This approach draws heavily from European existentialist philosophy,

particularly the ideas of Søren Kierkegaard, who explored the concept of `anxiety` in the face of freedom, and Martin Heidegger, whose concept of "Dasein" (being-in-the-world) profoundly influenced May's understanding of human existence as always situated and engaged.

May's work also shares significant common ground with `Humanistic Psychology`, often considered alongside figures like Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers. Like the humanists, May championed the idea of human potential, self-actualization, and the importance of subjective experience. However, existential psychology, as articulated by May, often presents a more nuanced, and at times darker, view of human nature, emphasizing the inherent struggles, anxieties, and tragic aspects of existence that humanistic psychology, with its more optimistic focus on growth, sometimes downplayed. May believed that true human flourishing could only occur through a courageous confrontation with these darker aspects, rather than simply striving for self-improvement or happiness.

Furthermore, May's methodology was deeply rooted in `phenomenology`, a philosophical approach that focuses on the systematic study of subjective experience. This meant prioritizing the individual's lived experience and perception of reality, without imposing preconceived theoretical frameworks. By employing a phenomenological lens, May sought to understand the world as it appears to the individual, respecting their unique perspective and the meaning they ascribe to their experiences. This commitment to understanding the subjective world of the client is a cornerstone of existential psychotherapy and distinguishes it from approaches that might seek to categorize or reduce human experience to objective observable behaviors or unconscious drives. His work, therefore, represents a rich synthesis of philosophical inquiry and psychological practice, firmly situating him within the broader category of existential-humanistic psychology.