

A person with dark hair tied back, wearing a black and white striped shirt, is shown from the side, looking down. They are in a dimly lit environment with a warm, golden light source behind them, creating a silhouette effect. The background appears to be a textured, possibly fabric-like surface.

# May: Existential Psychology

*Rollo May pioneered existential psychology in America, offering a profound new way of understanding human existence.*

*His approach emerged from **clinical experience** rather than controlled research, viewing people as **living in the present and ultimately responsible** for who they become.*

- A basic tenet of existentialism is that **existence precedes essence**, meaning that what people do is more important than what they are.
- A second assumption is that people are both **subjective and objective**: that is, they are thinking as well as acting beings.

# Philip's Story: A Crisis of Love and Freedom

*Philip, twice divorced, struggled through a turbulent relationship with Nicole, a writer in her mid-40s. After a charming summer together, Nicole suddenly announced she had fallen in love with Craig and planned to marry him. Philip was devastated—he lost weight, resumed smoking, and suffered insomnia.*

*Nicole continued seeing Philip whenever Craig wasn't available, eventually losing her infatuation (passion) and telling Philip she could never leave him. This confused Philip because he knew no such thing. He felt paralyzed—unable to change the relationship but also unable to break it off.*

## **The Pattern**

*Unpredictable women, duty to rescue, inability to leave*

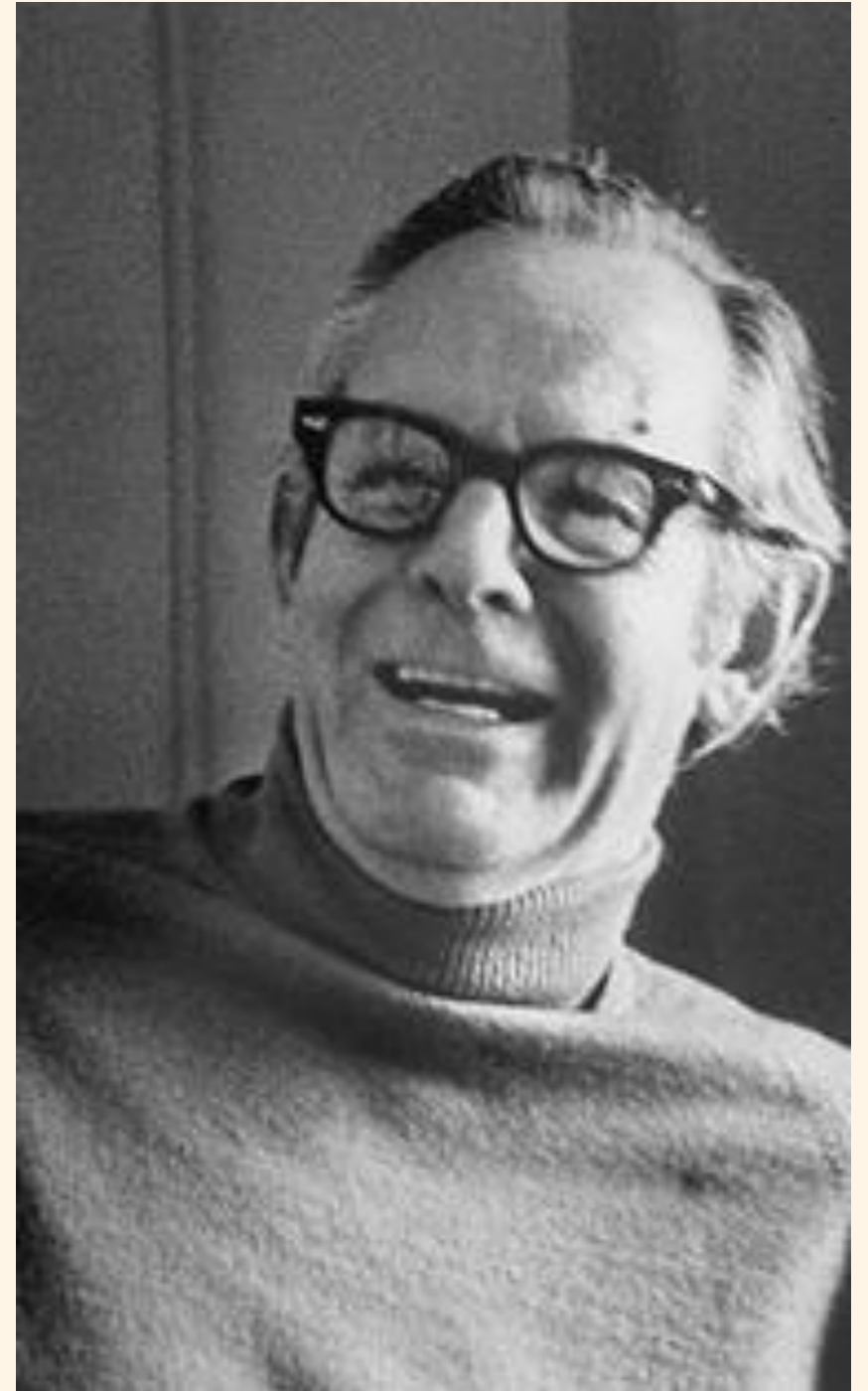
## **The Crisis**

*Betrayal, anger, paralysis, confusion about commitment*

# Rollo May: The Man Behind the Theory

*Born April 21, 1909, in Ada, Ohio, May grew up in an intellectually barren (unfruitful) environment. His parents argued frequently and eventually separated. His mother was unpredictable—"a bitch-kitty on wheels"—and his older sister suffered a psychotic breakdown. May found solace (relief) playing by the St. Clair River, claiming he learned more there than in school.*

*After studying English at Oberlin College, May spent three years roaming Europe as an artist. During his second year teaching in Greece, he suffered a nervous breakdown, realizing his rigid way of life no longer worked. This crisis forced him to listen to his inner voice and find new purposes for living.*



# Formative Influences

## 1932: Alfred Adler

*Attended Adler's summer seminars in Vienna, learning about human behavior and self-understanding*

1

## 1940s: Clinical Training

*Studied at William Alanson White Institute, influenced by Harry Stack Sullivan and Erich Fromm*

3

## 1933-1938: Union Seminary

*Met Paul Tillich, studied **existential theology**, ordained as Congregational minister*

2

## Late 1930s: Tuberculosis

*Three years at Saranac Sanitarium, confronted death, developed insights on **healing as active process***

4



# The Tuberculosis Crisis: A Turning Point

*In his early thirties, May contracted tuberculosis and spent three years at Saranac Sanitarium. With no medication available, he didn't know if he would live or die. For eighteen months, he waited helplessly for monthly X-rays.*

*Then came his **breakthrough insight**: the disease was taking advantage of his **passive attitude**. Patients who accepted their illness tended to die; those **who fought tended to survive**.*

*“I didn’t begin to truly recover until I found some **inner strength** — a **sense of personal responsibility** and the realization that I was the one living with tuberculosis. Once I took **ownership of my condition** and asserted my **own will to live**, I started to make real and lasting progress.”*



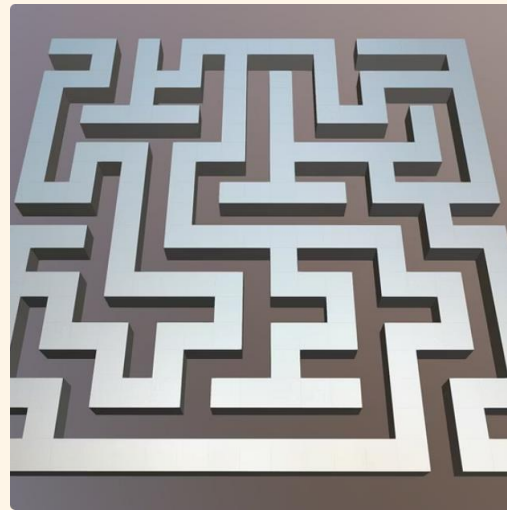
*"Healing is an active, not a passive, process. The person who is sick must be an active participant in the therapeutic process."*

# May's Major Contributions



## The Meaning of Anxiety (1950)

*His dissertation argued that **anxiety motivates** much human behavior and **can be constructive** when confronted courageously.*



## Man's Search for Himself (1953)

*Gained recognition among professionals and educated readers for **exploring authentic existence**.*



## Love and Will (1969)

*National bestseller that won the 1970 Ralph Waldo Emerson Award, examining the **union of love and will**.*

# Authentic Existence in Rollo May's View

For Rollo May, **authentic existence** means living with **awareness, responsibility, and courage** — facing one's own freedom and limitations honestly, rather than conforming to social expectations or escaping into denial.

It is the opposite of **inauthentic existence**, where a person lives **passively**, imitates others, and avoids self-awareness or anxiety.

## Key Elements

**Awareness of Being and Death:** Authentic existence starts when a person becomes **fully conscious of their existence** — **including the reality of death**, loneliness, and uncertainty. This awareness doesn't paralyze; instead, it motivates one to live meaningfully.

**Freedom and Responsibility:** To exist authentically, one must accept **personal responsibility for choices**. We are not simply products of environment or fate — we continually create ourselves through decisions.

**Courage to Be:** Authentic existence requires the **courage to face anxiety** rather than avoid it. **Anxiety is not pathology** for May — it's a sign of growth, signaling that we are confronting new possibilities of being.

**Meaning and Creativity:** Authentic individuals seek to **create values and meaning** in a world that offers none automatically. They express their potential — not through imitation but through **creative self-affirmation**.

# Existentialism: Core Philosophy



## Existence Over Essence

*Existence means to emerge and become; essence implies static substance. People's essence is their power to continually redefine themselves through choices.*



## Subject and Object United

*People are both subjective and objective, searching for truth by living active and authentic lives, not passive speculation.*



## Search for Meaning

*People ask fundamental questions: Who am I? Is life worth living? Does it have meaning? How can I realize my humanity?*



## Ultimate Responsibility

*Each person is responsible for who they are and what they become. As Sartre said: "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself."*



Concept	Meaning
<b>Subjective</b>	Inner experience, emotions, and personal meaning.
<b>Objective</b>	Real-world actions, relationships, and consequences.
<b>Truth</b>	Discovered through experience and responsibility, not abstract ideas.
<b>Authentic Life</b>	Acting consciously and courageously in alignment with one's own values.
<b>Passive Speculation</b>	Detached thinking without genuine living — rejected by existentialism.

Human beings find truth not by standing outside life and thinking about it, but by fully participating in it — making choices, taking risks, and living authentically.



# Being-in-the-World: Dasein

*Existentialists adopt a phenomenological approach—the world is best understood from our own perspective. The German word **Dasein** means "to exist there," expressing the **basic unity of person and environment**. The hyphens in "being-in-the-world" imply oneness of subject and object.*

*Many people suffer anxiety and despair from alienation—from themselves or their world. They have no clear self-image or feel isolated from a distant, foreign world. As people **gain power over nature**, they **lose touch with their relationship to the natural world**, becoming alienated from stars, soil, and sea.*



# Three Modes of Being-in-the-World

## Umwelt

*The **environment around us**—the world of objects, nature, and natural law. Includes **biological drives** like hunger and sleep, and **phenomena** like birth and death. Freud's theory emphasized this mode.*

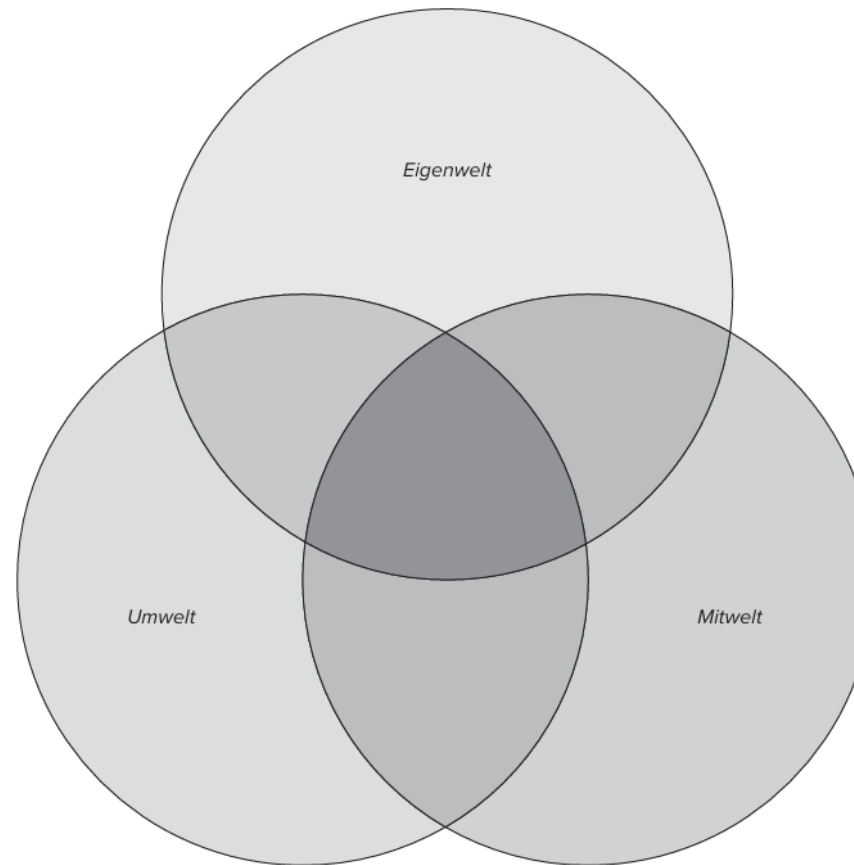


FIGURE 11.1 Healthy People Live Simultaneously in Umwelt, Mitwelt, and Eigenwelt.

## Mitwelt

*Our **relations with other people**. We must relate to people as people, not as things. Love demands **commitment and respect** for the other's being-in-the-world. Rogers's theory emphasized this mode.*

## Eigenwelt

*Our **relationship with ourselves**. **Awareness of oneself** as a human being, grasping who we are as we relate to things and people. What does this experience mean to me?*

***Healthy** people live in **all three** modes **simultaneously**—adapting to the natural world, relating to others as humans, and maintaining keen awareness of what experiences mean to them.*

# Nonbeing: The Dread of Death

Facing the reality of death helps us live more meaningfully.  
Denying it makes us play life too safely — and we miss its depth and beauty.

*"To grasp what it means **to exist**, one needs to grasp the fact that he **might not exist**, that he treads at every moment on the **sharp edge of possible annihilation**."*

*Death is the **most obvious** avenue of nonbeing. Life becomes **more vital** and meaningful when we **confront the possibility of our death**. May spoke of death as "**the one fact of my life which is not relative but absolute**."*

*When we don't courageously confront nonbeing by contemplating death, we experience it in other forms: **addiction to alcohol or drugs, promiscuous sexual activity, compulsive behaviors, blind conformity, or generalized hostility**.*

*Fear of death provokes **defensive living**, receiving less from life than if we confronted our nonexistence. As May said, "we are afraid of nonbeing and so we shrivel up our being." A **healthier alternative is facing death's inevitability** and realizing **nonbeing is an inseparable part of being**.*



# Anxiety: Normal vs. Neurotic

*May defined anxiety as "the subjective state of the individual's becoming aware that his existence can be destroyed, that he can become 'nothing.'" Anxiety springs from awareness of one's nonbeing or from threats to essential values. It exists when confronting the issue of fulfilling one's potentialities.*

## Normal Anxiety

*Proportionate to the threat, doesn't involve repression, can be confronted constructively. Experienced during growth, value changes, and creative moments. "All growth consists of the anxiety-creating surrender of past values."*

## Neurotic Anxiety

*Disproportionate to the threat, involves repression and intrapsychic conflict, managed by blocking activity and awareness. Experienced when **values transform into dogma**. Security bought at the price of surrendering opportunities for fresh learning and growth.*

# Philip's Neurotic Anxiety

*Philip's neurotic anxiety was evident in his **attachment to unpredictable** and "crazy" women, beginning in early childhood. During his first two years, his world contained primarily his mother and a sister two years older. His **mother was a borderline schizophrenic** whose behavior alternated between tenderness and cruelty. His sister was definitely schizophrenic and later spent time in a mental hospital.*

*Philip learned early that he had to **attach** himself to women but also **rescue** them. "Life, then, for Philip would understandably not be free, but rather would require that he be continuously on guard or on duty." His neurotic anxiety blocked any new and successful ways of behaving toward Nicole—his approach **recapitulated childhood behaviors** toward his mother and sister.*

# Ontological Guilt: Three Forms

*Guilt arises when people deny their potentialities, fail to perceive others' needs accurately, or remain oblivious (unaware) to their dependence on the natural world. May recognized **three forms of ontological guilt**, each corresponding to one mode of being-in-the-world.*



## Separation Guilt (Umwelt)

*Results from **alienation from nature**. As civilization advances technologically, people become removed from the natural world—living in climate-controlled dwellings (residences), using motorized transportation, consuming food gathered by others.*



## Interpersonal Guilt (Mitwelt)

*Stems from **inability to perceive others' world accurately**. We can only see through our own eyes and never perfectly judge others' needs. We do violence to their true identity, leading to feelings of inadequacy in relationships.*



## Self-Denial Guilt (Eigenwelt)

*Associated with **denying our own potentialities or failing to fulfill them**. **Universal** because none of us can completely fulfill all potentials. **Similar to Maslow's Jonah complex**—the fear of being or doing one's best.*

# Intentionality: The Structure of Meaning

*Intentionality is the structure that **gives meaning to experience** and allows people to **make decisions about the future**. Without intentionality, people could neither choose nor act on their choice. **Action** implies **intentionality**; intentionality implies action—the two are **inseparable**.*

*Intentionality **bridges the gap between subject and object**. It is "the structure of meaning which makes it possible for us, subjects that we are, to see and understand the outside world, objective that it is."*

*Intentionality is sometimes **unconscious**. Philip didn't see that his duty to care for Nicole despite her "crazy" behavior connected to early experiences with his unpredictable mother and "crazy" sister. He was trapped in unconscious belief that unpredictable women must be cared for, making it impossible to discover new ways of relating.*

## ❏ **Example: The Paper**

*A man at his desk observing paper can write on it, fold it into an airplane for his grandson, or sketch a picture. In all three instances, subject and object are identical, but actions depend on intentions and the meaning given to experience—a function of both himself and his environment.*



In existential and phenomenological psychology (especially in Rollo May's and Edmund Husserl's thinking), intentionality means that **consciousness is always directed toward something** — every thought, feeling, or perception has an object.

For example:

You don't just "feel" — you feel **something** (sad about a loss, happy about a success).

You don't just "think" — you think **about something** (a person, an idea, a problem).

This aboutness links the subjective world (our inner experiences) with the objective world (things and events outside us).

So, intentionality is what bridges the gap between inner experience and external reality — it's **how meaning is created in human life**.

*“Intentionality connects our inner experience (the subject) with the external world (the object). It is the mental structure that allows us, as conscious beings, to give meaning to and understand the world around us.”*

# Care, Love, and Will

*Philip had a history of taking care of others, especially women. He gave Nicole a job and several thousand dollars. Despite this pattern, he never really learned to care for them.*



## Care

*Recognizing someone as a fellow human being, identifying with their pain or joy. An **active process**, the opposite of apathy. "Care is a state in which something does matter." Care is the **source of both love and will**.*



## Love

*"A delight in the **presence of the other person** and an affirming of their value and development as much as one's own." **Without care**, there can be **no love**—only empty sentimentality or transient sexual arousal.*



## Will

*"The **capacity to organize one's self** so that movement in a certain direction or toward a certain goal may take place." Requires **self-consciousness** and implies either/or **choice**. Will gives self-direction and maturity to wish.*

# The Union of Love and Will

*Modern society suffers from an **unhealthy division of love and will**. Love has become associated with sex, while will has come to mean dogged (stubborn) determination or willpower. Neither captures the true meaning of these terms.*

## The Biological Split

*When children first enter the world, they are at one with the universe, their mother, and themselves. "Our needs are met without self-conscious effort—this is the first freedom, **the first 'yes.'**"*

*Later, as will develops, it manifests as opposition—**the first "no."** This should be seen as **positive self-assertion**, but parents often interpret it negatively, stifling the child's self-assertion. Children learn to disassociate will from the blissful love they previously enjoyed.*

## The Task of Maturity

*Our task is to **unite love and will**. Neither blissful love nor self-serving will have a role in this union. For the **mature person**, both love and will mean **reaching out toward another person**.*

*Both involve care, both necessitate choice, both imply action, and both require responsibility.*

# Four Forms of Love

## Sex

*A **biological function** satisfied through sexual intercourse or release of tension. "The power of **procreation**, the **drive** which perpetuates the race, the source of the human being's most **intense pleasure** and most **pervasive anxiety**." In modern times, sex has become a problem—society went from Victorian **guilt** about having sex to contemporary guilt about not having it.*

## Philia

***Intimate nonsexual friendship** between two people. Takes time to grow and develop. Examples include slowly evolving love between siblings or lifelong friends. "Friendship in the simplest, most direct terms." Philia is a necessary prerequisite for **healthy erotic relationships**—it makes eros possible.*

## Eros

*A **psychological desire** seeking procreation or creation through enduring union with a loved one. Eros is making love; sex is manipulating organs. Eros is the wish to establish lasting union; sex is the desire to experience pleasure. Built on care and tenderness, eros is "**the salvation** of sex."*

## Agape

*"**Esteem for the other**, concern for the other's welfare beyond any gain that one can get out of it." **Altruistic, spiritual love** that doesn't depend on any behaviors or characteristics of the other person. **Undeserved and unconditional**. Just as eros depends on philia, philia needs agape.*



# Authentic Love: The Integration

*Healthy adult relationships **blend all four** forms of love. They are based on **sexual satisfaction**, a desire for an **enduring union**, genuine **friendship**, and an **unselfish concern** for the welfare of the other person.*

*"Such authentic love, unfortunately, is **quite difficult**. It requires **self-affirmation** and the **assertion** of oneself. At the same time it requires **tenderness**, **affirmation of the other**, relaxing of competition as much as possible, **self-abnegation** (sacrifice) at times in the interests of the loved one, and the age-old virtues of **mercy and forgiveness**."*



# May's Legacy and Impact



## Recognition and Awards

*1970 Ralph Waldo Emerson Award, 1971 APA Distinguished Contribution Award, 1972 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Award, 1987 American Psychological Foundation Gold Medal for Lifetime Contributions*



## Academic Influence

*Visiting professor at Harvard and Princeton, lectured at Yale, Dartmouth, Columbia, Vassar, and Oberlin. Adjunct professor at NYU, chairman of Association of Existential Psychology and Psychiatry*



## Written Contributions

*Best-known American representative of existential movement. Popular writer among both laypeople and professionals. Spoke against anti-scientific tendencies while maintaining humanistic values*

*May died October 22, 1994, in Tiburon, California, after two years of declining health. He was survived by his third wife Georgia Lee Miller Johnson, son Robert, and twin daughters Allegra and Carolyn.*

# The Courage to Be

The term “ontological” comes from **ontology**, the **study of being**.

For Rollo May, ontological guilt is the **inevitable sense of guilt** that **arises simply from being human**. It is not caused by breaking rules or committing sins, but by the limitations of existence — the awareness that we can never live up to all our possibilities or fully meet our responsibilities to ourselves, others, and the world.

May believed many people lack the courage to face their destiny, and in *fleeing from it*, they *give up much of their freedom*. Having *negated* (reject) their freedom, they run away from responsibility. *Not willing* to make choices, they lose sight of who they are and develop a *sense of insignificance and alienation*.

In contrast, *healthy* people *challenge* their destiny, *cherish* (value) their freedom, and *live authentically* with others and themselves. They recognize the *inevitability of death* and have the *courage to live life in the present*.

"Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom." — Søren Kierkegaard

May's existential psychology reminds us that we are *ultimately responsible for who we become*. Through confronting anxiety, accepting *ontological guilt*, and uniting love with will, we can live authentically and fully realize our humanity.



Freedom and Destiny

# The Paradox of Human Existence

*Rollo May's existential psychology explores:*

- *how healthy individuals navigate the delicate balance between freedom and destiny*
- *how we can embrace both self-assertion and acceptance of our limitations to live authentically.*





# Understanding Freedom

## Early Definition (1967)

*Freedom is "the individual's **capacity to know** that he is **the determined one**."*

*This means **understanding our destiny**—that **death is possible** at any moment, that we have inherent characteristics and **weaknesses**, and that **early experiences** shape our behavioral patterns.*

## Later Refinement (1981)

*Freedom is the **possibility of changing**, even when we don't know what those changes might be.*

*It "entails **being able to harbor different possibilities in one's mind** even though it is not clear at the moment which way one must act."*

*This condition often leads to **increased anxiety**, but it is **normal** anxiety—the kind that **healthy** people welcome and manage effectively.*

# Two Forms of Freedom

## Existential Freedom

*Freedom of action—the freedom of doing. Most middle-class adult Americans enjoy large measures of existential freedom: traveling across state lines, choosing associates, voting for representatives, selecting from thousands of items in a supermarket.*

## Essential Freedom

*Freedom of being—inner freedom. Physical confinement or denial of liberty often allows people to face their destiny and gain freedom of being. Prisoners and concentration camp inmates often speak enthusiastically of their "inner freedom" despite limited existential freedom.*

- ❏ *Existential freedom often makes essential freedom more difficult. One need not be imprisoned to attain essential freedom—**destiny itself serves as our prison**, forcing us to look beyond day-to-day action.*

# What Is Destiny?

May defined *destiny* as "the *design of the universe speaking through the design of each one of us.*" Our *ultimate destiny* is *death*, but destiny also includes *biological properties* like intelligence, gender, size and strength, and genetic predisposition toward certain illnesses. Psychological and cultural factors contribute as well.

## Not Predetermined

*Destiny does not mean preordained or foredoomed. It is our destination, our terminus, our goal.*

## Power to Choose

*Within the boundaries of our destiny, we have the power to choose and confront our destiny, **though we cannot** make any change we wish.*

## Freedom and Destiny Intertwined

*"The paradox is that freedom owes its vitality to destiny, and destiny owes its significance to freedom."  
**One cannot exist without the other.***

# The Paradox of Freedom and Destiny

*"Freedom and destiny are not antithetical but rather a **normal paradox of life**. Freedom owes its vitality to destiny, and destiny owes its significance to freedom."*

*"Freedom without a sense of destiny becomes chaos — it turns into doing whatever we want without purpose. Yet destiny without freedom is empty. True freedom exists only when our choices are guided by meaning and purpose."*

*Freedom and destiny give birth to each other. As we challenge our destiny, we gain freedom, and as we achieve freedom, we push at the boundaries of destiny.*

# Philip's Story: Confronting Destiny

*Philip, an architect immobilized by his relationship with Nicole, sought Rollo May as his therapist. He was paralyzed with inaction because he had refused to accept his destiny. He saw no connection between his adult pattern of relating to women and his childhood strategy of getting along in an unpredictable and "crazy" world with a disturbed mother and schizophrenic sister.*

## Denial of Destiny

*Philip tried to compensate for his destiny, consciously denying it. He searched for someone to make up for being born into an unwelcoming world—a destiny he did not choose.*

## Therapeutic Breakthrough

*After several weeks of psychotherapy, Philip stopped blaming his mother and began to see the positive things she did for him. As he came to terms with his destiny, he gained his freedom of being.*

1

2

3

## Resentment and Confusion

*His denial left him resentful and confused. His inability to face his destiny robbed him of personal freedom and kept him tied to his mother.*



# The Power of Myths

May was deeply concerned with the **powerful effects of myths** on individuals and cultures. He contended that people of Western civilization have an **urgent need for myths**. Lacking myths to believe in, they have turned to religious cults, drug addiction, and popular culture in a vain effort to find meaning in their lives.

## What Are Myths?

Myths are **not falsehoods**—they are **conscious and unconscious belief systems that provide explanations for personal and social problems**. May compared myths to support beams in a house: not visible from the outside, but they hold the house together and make it habitable.

Myths are stories that **unify a society**. They are "essential to the process of **keeping our souls alive** and bringing us **new meaning** in a difficult and often **meaningless world**."



For May, myths are **vital life-guiding stories** that connect individuals to the **larger human experience**. Without them, people drift into **emptiness, anxiety, and false idols**. He believed that creating new, life-affirming myths — such as those about creativity, love, and human courage — was **essential for psychological and cultural renewal**.

### 1. Ancient or Traditional Myths (Meaningful Narratives)

**Greek myths** such as *Prometheus* (the quest for knowledge and defiance of limits) or *Odysseus* (the search for home and identity) — these offered models for courage, creativity, and endurance.

**Religious myths** like *the Creation story*, the *Fall of Adam and Eve*, or the *Exodus* — which provided people with a framework to understand suffering, responsibility, and hope.

**Hero myths** such as those of *King Arthur* or *Beowulf* — teaching ideals of honor, loyalty, and moral struggle.

### 2. Modern Myths (Cultural Substitutes)

**The myth of success** — the belief that wealth and fame bring happiness and meaning.

**The myth of progress and technology** — faith that science or material advancement alone can solve existential problems.

**The myth of romantic love** — the idea that fulfillment and identity can only be achieved through finding a perfect partner.

### 3. Contemporary Replacements (What May Criticized)

May argued that when genuine myths are absent, people turn to distorted substitutes:

**Religious cults** offering rigid or fanatical belief systems.

**Drug culture** promising transcendence or escape from meaninglessness.

**Celebrity and popular culture** serving as shallow, temporary forms of worship.

# Two Levels of Communication



## Rationalistic Language

*Truth takes precedence over the people who are communicating. Focuses on **empirical accuracy** and logical precision.*



## Mythic Communication

*The total **human experience** is more important than empirical accuracy. People use myths and symbols to **transcend** the immediate situation, **expand** self-awareness, and **search** for identity.*

# The Oedipus Myth: A Universal Story

Many believe the Oedipus story is a powerful myth in our culture because it contains elements of *existential crises common* to everyone.

01	02	03
<b>Birth</b>	<b>Separation or Exile</b>	<b>Sexual Union and Hostility</b>
<i>The beginning of existence and consciousness</i>	<i>Removal from parents and home</i>	<i>Complex relationships with parental figures</i>
04	05	
<b>Assertion of Independence</b>	<b>Death</b>	
<i>The search for identity and self-knowledge</i>	<i>Acceptance of mortality and life's meaning</i>	

# Psychopathology: Apathy and Emptiness

## The Modern Malaise (sickness)

According to May, **apathy and emptiness**—not anxiety and guilt—are the **malaise of modern times**. When people deny their destiny or abandon their myths, they lose their purpose for being and become **directionless**. Without goals or destination, people become sick and engage in self-defeating and self-destructive behaviors.

### **Alienation from the World (Umwelt)**

*People feel helpless to prevent natural disasters, reverse industrialization, or make meaningful contact with nature.*

### **Alienation from Others (Mitwelt)**

*Many feel insignificant in a world that increasingly dehumanizes the individual, unable to connect authentically with other people.*

### **Alienation from Self (Eigenwelt)**

*This sense of insignificance leads to apathy and a state of diminished consciousness—the **most profound form** of alienation.*



# Understanding Neurotic Symptoms

May saw *psychopathology as lack of communication*—the *inability to know* others and to share oneself with them.

*Psychologically disturbed* individuals **deny their destiny** and thus **lose their freedom**. They erect neurotic symptoms, not to regain freedom, but to renounce (give up) it.

## Function of Symptoms

Symptoms narrow the person's phenomenological world to a size that makes coping easier. The compulsive person adopts a rigid routine, making new choices unnecessary. Symptoms may be temporary (stress-induced headache) or relatively permanent (childhood-rooted apathy).

## Philip's Pattern

Philip's psychopathology was tied to his early environment. These experiences set him up to adjust by suppressing anger, developing apathy, and trying to be a "good little boy." His behavior toward his wives and Nicole represented denial of freedom and a self-defeating attempt to escape destiny.

- ❏ *Neurotic symptoms do not represent a failure of adjustment, but rather a proper and necessary adjustment by which one's Dasein can be preserved.*



# The Purpose of Psychotherapy

## Setting People Free

*"The purpose of psychotherapy is to set people free. Psychotherapy must be concerned with helping people experience their existence, and relieving symptoms is merely a by-product of that experience."*

*May rejected the idea that psychotherapy should reduce anxiety and ease feelings of guilt. Instead, he suggested that **psychotherapy should make people more human**—help them expand their consciousness so they will be in a better position to make choices. These choices lead to the simultaneous growth of freedom and responsibility.*

# The Therapeutic Relationship

May insisted that therapists who concentrate on a patient's symptoms are *missing the more important picture*. When patients become more free and more human, their neurotic symptoms usually disappear, neurotic anxiety gives way to normal anxiety, and neurotic guilt is replaced by normal guilt. But these gains are secondary.



## I-Thou Encounter

Therapists establish **a one-to-one relationship (Mitwelt)** that enables patients to become more **aware of themselves** and **live more fully** in their own world (Eigenwelt). **Both** therapist and patient are viewed as **subjects rather than objects**.



## Guide and Friend

May described **therapy as partly religion, partly science, and partly friendship**. The therapist serves as guide, friend, and interpreter to persons on their journeys through their private hells and purgatories.



## Confrontation

The friendship is not ordinary—it calls for the therapist to be confronting and to challenge the patient. **The relationship itself is therapeutic**, independent of anything therapists might say or any theoretical orientation they might have.

# Therapeutic Techniques with Philip

1

## Direct Interpretation

*May explained to Philip that his relationship with Nicole was an attempt to hold on to his mother. This confronted Philip with information he had been hiding from himself.*

2

## Fantasy Conversation with Mother

*Philip held a fantasy conversation with his dead mother, speaking for both himself and her. For the first time, he empathized with her and saw himself from his mother's point of view. He realized she was proud of him and recalled her courage.*

3

## Dialogue with "Little Philip"

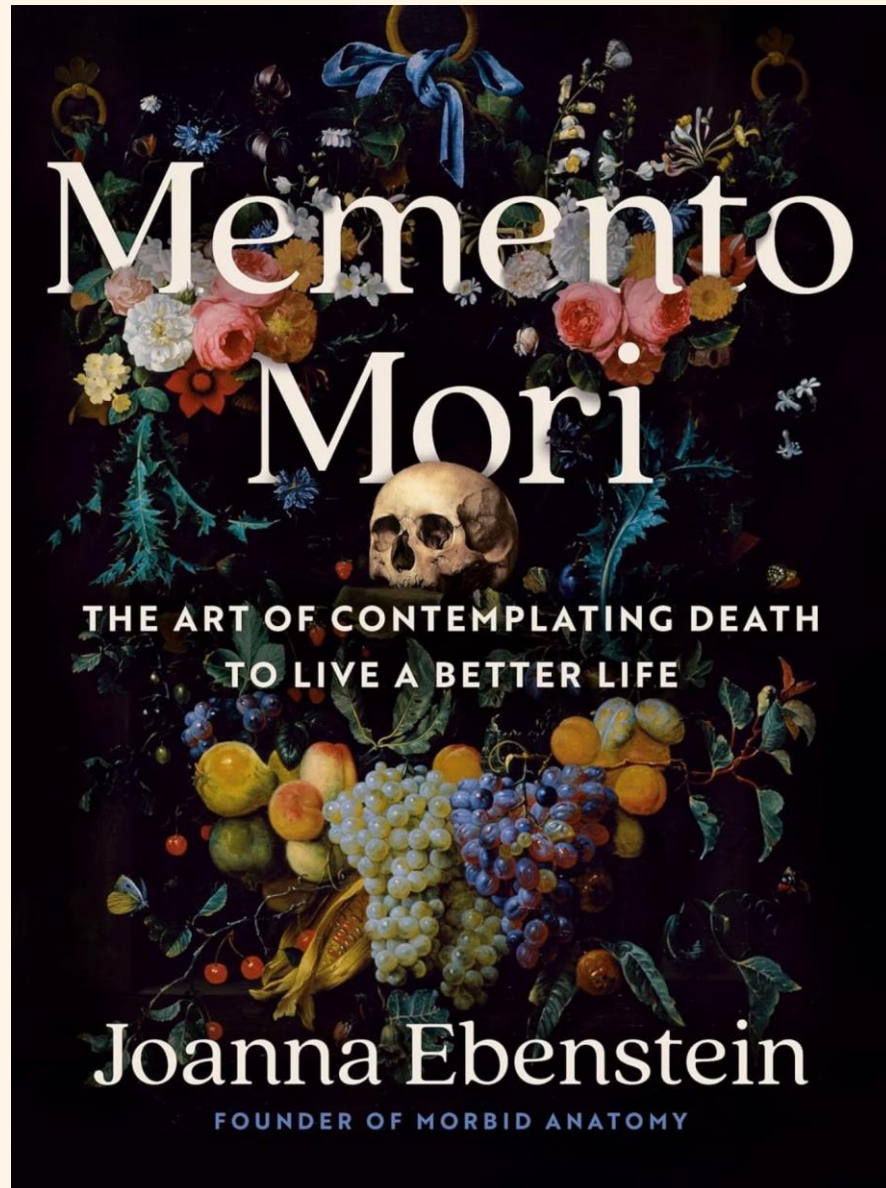
*Philip brought a photo of himself as a boy and had a fantasy conversation with "Little Philip." This helped him overcome his loneliness and allay(relive) his jealousy of Nicole. "Little Philip" became his friendly companion.*

*At the end of therapy, Philip became more conscious of a part of himself that had been there all the time. An awareness of new possibilities allowed him to move toward personal freedom—"the **uniting of himself with that early self** that he had had to lock up in a dungeon in order to survive."*



# Research on Existential Anxiety

May's existential theory has been moderately influential as a method of psychotherapy but has sparked **almost no direct empirical research**. However, one existential topic to receive empirical attention has been existential anxiety.



## Definition of Anxiety

May defined anxiety as "the apprehension cued off by a threat to some value which the individual holds essential to his or her existence as a self." (We feel anxious when an important part of our identity, values, or sense of self is in danger.)

When events *threaten our physical or psychological existence*, we experience *existential anxiety*.

The **strongest threat to our existence is death**. May and Yalom argued that "a major developmental task is to deal with the terror of obliteration (annihilation)."

*In a sense, life is the process of coping with and confronting death.*

# Terror Management Theory

*An existential approach to the study of terror and death has carried over into "terror management theory" (TMT), a modern experimental offshoot (derivate) of existential psychology. Inspired by Ernest Becker, Kierkegaard, and Otto Rank, TMT tests the basic assumption that **humans are first and foremost motivated by fear of death.***



## Mortality Salience

*Reminders of mortality lead people to distance from their physical bodies, report less interest in physical aspects of sex, express more disgust toward bodily products, and avoid sensations grounded in the body.*



## Cultural Defenses

*Human creativity, culture, and meaning serve as **unconscious defenses against mortality**. We disavow (deny) our corporeal (physical) selves to maintain psychological equanimity (calmness).*



## Women's Bodies

*Women's prominent role in reproduction renders **women's bodies especially problematic** from a terror management perspective. **Taboos about women's reproductive bodies** are long-standing and **near universal**.*

# Finding Meaning Through Relationships

Research has demonstrated that *people's attachments to others in close relationships serve a terror management function. One way we manage our awareness of mortality is by investing in **May's Mitwelt**: in loving relationships.*

## Seeking Connection

*Reminding people of death leads them to initiate interactions with others, increase their desire for **intimacy and commitment** in romantic partnerships, and express **closer feelings toward their parents**.*

## Attachment Styles

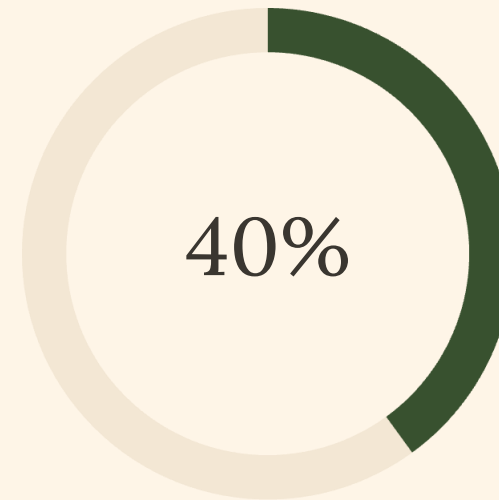
***Securely attached** individuals exaggerate how positively **their romantic partners** see them after death reminders. Those with **anxious attachment** turn to **parents for positive regard**. **Avoidant** individuals show **no effect**.*

## Positive Regard

*Cox and Arndt (2012) found that **perceived positive regard** from close relationships explains why relationships **buffer against death anxiety**. Our sense that others care for and prize us contributes to feeling we are significant persons in the world.*

# The Upside of Mortality Awareness

Newer research confirms that humans can exist creatively within the **threat of nonexistence**. Conscious thoughts of death may help human beings **reprioritize their life goals**—what Heidegger called the "**awakening experience**" and we often call a "**reality check**."



## Increased Helping

*People passing through a cemetery were 40% more likely to help someone who dropped something than those a block away.*

## Facing Actual Death

*Blog posts of terminally ill cancer patients become more positive as death approaches. Last words of death-row inmates are more positive and less negative than forecasts of noninmates. This difference is accounted for by greater focus on **social connections and spiritual life**. (People near death often focus more on relationships and spiritual meaning, rather than fear.)*

## Personal Growth

*Daily conscious contemplations of mortality led people to place greater value on personal, **intrinsic goals** over status-oriented, extrinsic goals. Death awareness can facilitate **pro-social and personal growth goals**. (Being aware of death can actually motivate people to live more meaningfully and compassionately.)*

*"Death never becomes worse as one approaches it. Rather, it becomes better and even soothing to our psyches, particularly if we can reflect on and solidify our connections with others."*



# Evaluating May's Theory

*May's existential psychology offers a **profound philosophical perspective on human nature**, though it faces challenges as a scientific theory.*

## Low

### Research Generation

*May did not formulate his views in a theoretical structure suitable to generating specific hypotheses. Limited research flows directly from his theory.*

## Low

### Falsifiability

*The theory is too amorphous to suggest specific hypotheses that could confirm or disconfirm its major concepts.*

## Moderate

### Organization

*May explored aspects of humanity not examined by other personality theorists, though his use of concepts was sometimes inconsistent and he neglected topics like development, cognition, and learning.*

## Strengths

- *Addresses complex issues without oversimplifying*
- *Connects with readers' humanity*
- *Explores deep aspects of human experience*
- *Emphasizes uniqueness and phenomenology*
- *Balances free choice with destiny*

## Limitations

- *Weak as practical guide to action*
- *Lacks internal consistency and operational definitions*
- *Imprecise terminology*
- *Neglects important personality topics*
- *More philosophical than scientific*