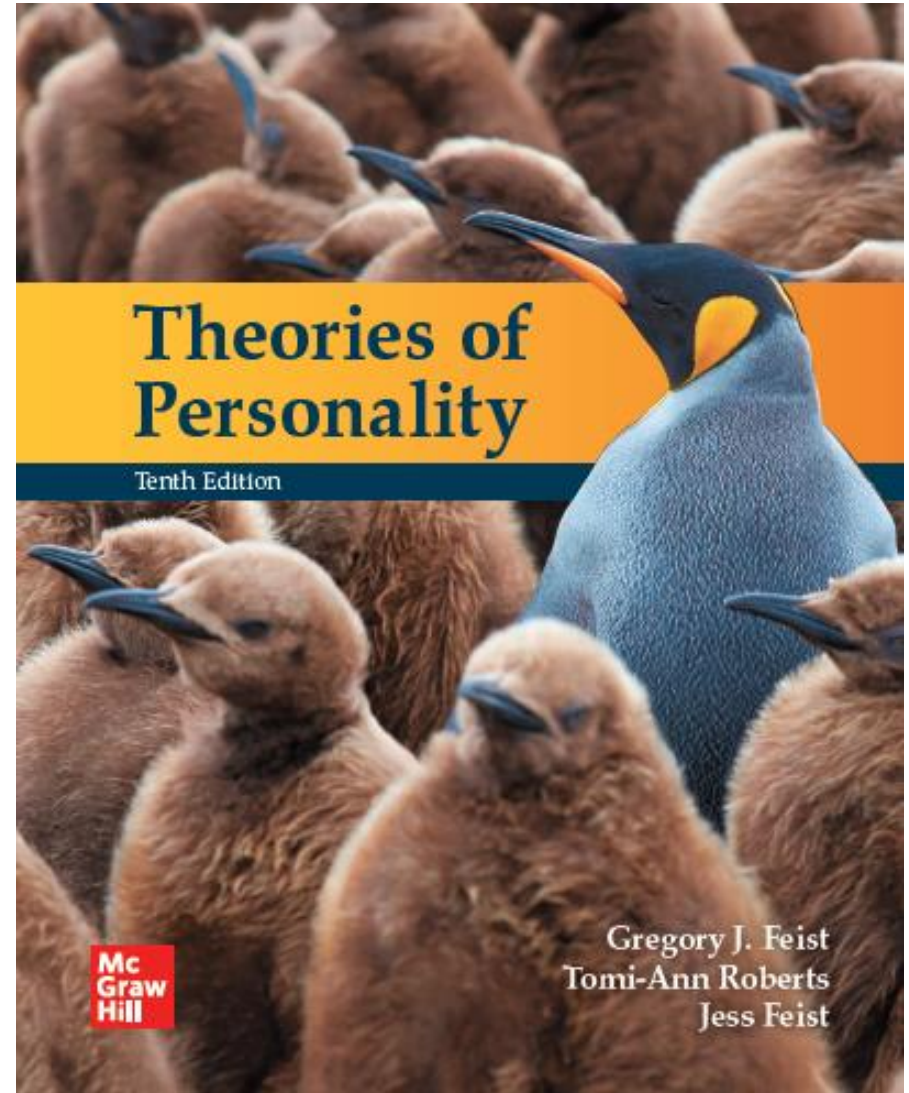
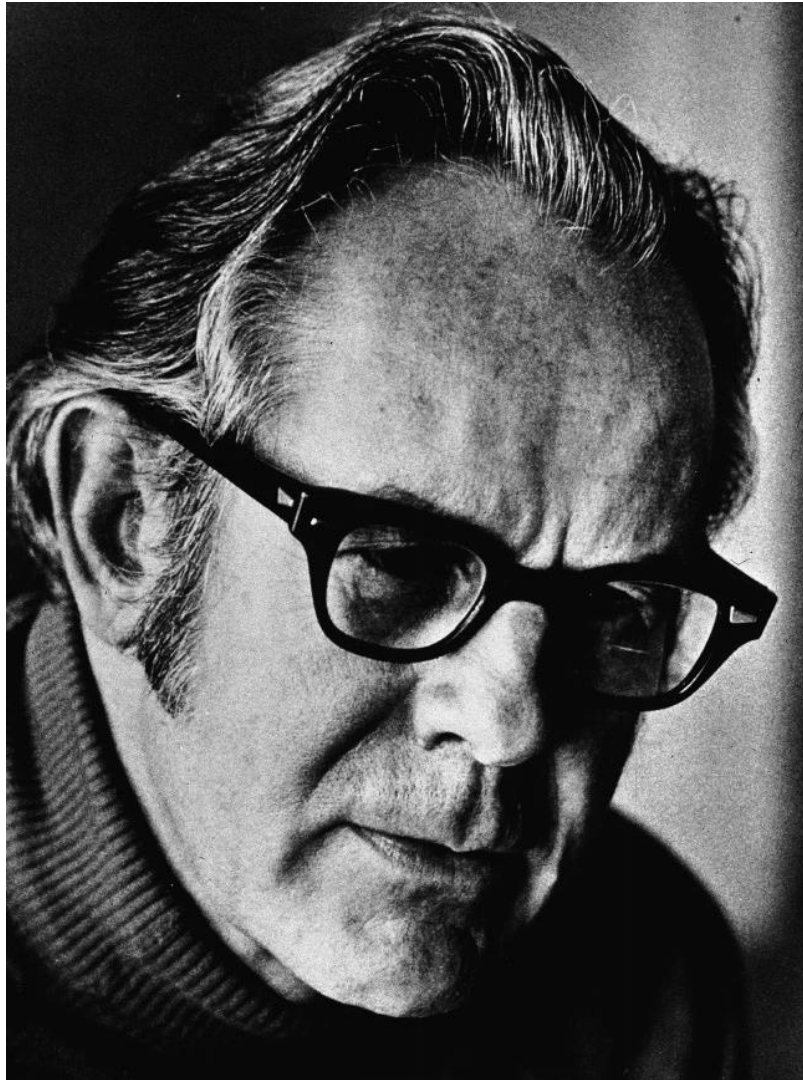


May: Existential Psychology

Chapter 11



Rollo May



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Chapter Outline ¹

- Overview of existential psychology.
- Biography of Rollo May.
- Background of existentialism.
- The case of Philip.
- Anxiety.
- Guilt.
- Intentionality.
- Care, love, and will.

Chapter Outline ²

- Freedom and destiny.
- Power of myth.
- Psychopathology.
- Psychotherapy.
- Related research.
- Critique of May.
- Concept of humanity.

Overview of Existential Psychology

Rooted in European existential philosophy.

Foremost spokesperson for existential psychology in the United States was Rollo May.

- Approach was based on clinical experience.
- People live in the present and are responsible for their experiences.
- People lack courage to face destiny and in the process of fleeing from it, they give up their freedom.
- Healthy people challenge destiny and live authentically.

Biography of Rollo May ¹

- Born in Ada, Ohio, in 1909.
- Received a bachelor's degree from Oberlin College in 1930.
- Lived as an itinerant artist in Europe for three years after college, where he heard Adler speak.
- Returned to the United States in 1933.
- Graduated from Union Theological Seminary with a Master of Divinity degree in 1938.

Biography of Rollo May ²

- Served as a pastor for two years and then quit to study psychoanalysis.
- Received his P h D in clinical psychology from Columbia University in 1949.
- Published *The Meaning of Anxiety* in 1950.
- Served as a visiting professor at various institutions including Harvard and Princeton.
- Died in Tiburon, California, in 1994.

Background of Existentialism

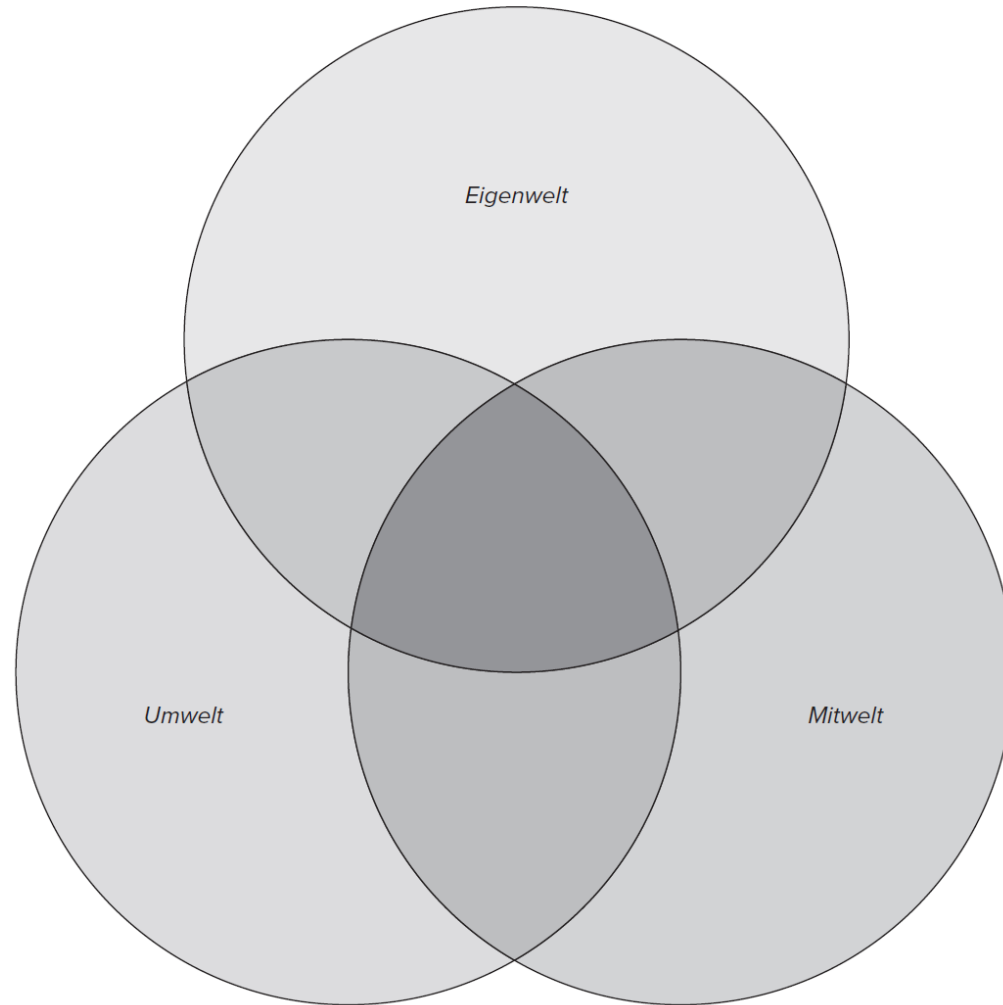
What is existentialism?

- Existence takes precedence over essence.
- No split between subject and object.
- People search for some meaning to their lives.
- Each of us is responsible for who we are and what we become.
- Basically antitheoretical.

Basic concepts.

- **Being-in-the-world.**
- **Nonbeing.**

Figure 11.1: Healthy People Live Simultaneously in Umwelt, Mitwelt, and Eigenwelt



The Case of Philip

Existential psychology is concerned with the individual's struggle to work through life's experiences and to grow toward becoming more fully human.

- May (1981) described this struggle in a report on one of his patients—Philip.

Anxiety

Human behavior is motivated by a sense of dread and anxiety.

Normal anxiety.

- May (1967) defined normal anxiety as that that “which is proportionate to the threat, does not involve repression, and can be confronted constructively on the conscious level.”

Neurotic anxiety.

- May (1967) defined neurotic anxiety as “a reaction which is disproportionate to the threat, involves repression and other forms of intrapsychic conflict, and is managed by various kinds of blocking-off of activity and awareness.”

Guilt ₁

Arises when people:

- Deny their potentialities.
- Fail to accurately perceive the needs of others.
- Remain oblivious to their dependence on the natural world.

Anxiety and guilt are ontological.

Guilt ₂

Three forms of ontological guilt.

- **Umwelt.**
- **Mitwelt.**
- **Eigenwelt.**

Intentionality

- Structure that gives meaning to experience and allows people to make decisions about the future.
- Bridges the gap between subject and object.
- Can be unconscious.

Care, Love, and Will

Union of love and will.

Forms of love.

- Sex.
- **Eros.**
- **Philia.**
- **Agape.**

Freedom and Destiny

Freedom defined.

- May (1967) said that “freedom is the individual’s capacity to know that he is the determined one.”

Forms of freedom.

- **Existential freedom.**
- **Existential freedom.**

What is destiny?

- Philip’s destiny.

The Power of Myth ¹

Myths have powerful effects on individuals and cultures.

Rollo May believed that westerners have an urgent need for myths.

- Because they have lost many of their traditional myths, they turn to religious cults, drugs, and popular culture to fill the vacuum.

The Power of Myth ²

People communicate on two levels.

- Rationalistic language.
- Myth.

Psychopathology

- Apathy and emptiness are the malaise of modern times.
- People have become alienated from the natural world or Umwelt, from other people or Mitwelt, and from themselves or Eigenwelt.
- Symptoms can be temporary or permanent.

Psychotherapy

Goal of May's psychotherapy was to make people more fully human, for example, expand their consciousness.

The purpose of psychotherapy is to set people free.

Existential psychotherapy de-emphasizes techniques while stressing the personal qualities of the therapist.

- Must establish one-to-one relationship.

Related Research

An existential approach to the study of terror and death has carried over into “terror management,” a modern experimental offshoot of existential psychology.

Mortality Salience and Denial of Our Animal Nature

Goldenberg et al., 2001.

- People distance themselves from animals because they remind them of their physical body and death.

Finding Meaning in the Mitwelt: Attachment and Close Relationships

Empirical research has demonstrated that people's attachments to others in close relationships serve a terror management function.

Reminding people of death leads to:

- Initiating interactions with other people (Taubman-Ben-Ari, Findler, & Mikulincer, 2002).
- An increase in the desire for intimacy and commitment in romantic partnerships (Florian, Mikulincer, & Hirschberger, 2002).
- Adult children expressing closer feelings toward parents (Cox et al., 2008).

Critique of May

May's theory is:

- Moderate on organizing knowledge and parsimony.
- Low on internal consistency and generating research.
- Very low on falsifiability and guiding action.

Concept of Humanity

- Free choice over determinism.
- Optimism over pessimism.
- Teleology over causality.
- Equal emphasis on conscious and unconscious and social influence and biology.
- Uniqueness over similarity.



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