Become Who You Are: Integrating the Conceptions of Will and Being in the Psychotherapeutic Theory of Rollo May

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Summary

This article discusses the essential foundation of Rollo May’s unique approach to psychotherapy. Emphasis is placed on exploring and revealing the most basic elements that can be said to constitute the center of May’s psychotherapeutic theory. This center exhibits a fundamental concern with the reality of an individual’s being, that is, with empowering the individual to experience the reality of his or her being in a deeper and more authentic way. Such empowerment relies on and engages the dynamic processes of freedom and will, which make it possible for an individual to confront and actualize his or her inner potentialities for living. The heart of the therapeutic endeavor, then, is the supportive challenge to experience the depths of one’s
existence, to become who one truly is. The article concludes with an emphasis on May's concept of self-affirmation, a revolutionary way of existing in the world involving individual, cultural, and global implications for positive transformation.

**Keywords:** May; psychotherapy; will; being; become; self-affirmation

Rollo May expressed strong and clearly defined ideas concerning his particular approach to psychotherapy. Although he acknowledged the validity of giving attention to intrapsychic dynamics, expression of affect, and overt behavior patterns, he insisted that such aspects of a client's functioning could only be properly understood within the context of his or her whole existence. Therefore, in formulating his own conception of the therapeutic process, May did not emphasize the study of client functioning as a rigid focus on isolated, independent units of clinical observation. He rather chose to view the aspects of a client's functioning as meaningful only relative to their specific role and place within the particular form of the client's existence at any given moment. The crucial issue, then, inherent to the therapeutic process is to understand the subjective meaning of the particular mode in which a client is choosing to exist. This is all to say that May's unique approach to psychotherapy is grounded in a value of commitment to understanding the being of an individual client. From this foundational value arise the derivative values of freedom, will, responsibility, and potentiality. These primary values will be addressed in turn; however, a discussion of May's therapeutic approach must begin with his interpretation of the central value of being.

**PSYCHOTHERAPY AS ONTOLOGICAL PROCESS**

**The Meaning of Being Within the Context of Psychotherapy**

In his landmark coedited work *Existence: A New Dimension in Psychiatry and Psychology* (May, Angel, & Ellenberger, 1958), May discusses the contributions of existential psychotherapy. It is significant that his discussion begins with the following statements:

The fundamental contribution of existential therapy is its understanding of man as being. It does not deny the validity of dynamisms and the study of specific behavior patterns in their rightful places. But it holds that drives or dynamisms, by whatever name one calls
them, can be understood only in the context of the structure of the existence of the person we are dealing with. The distinctive character of existential analysis is, thus, that it is concerned with ontology, the science of being, and with Dasein, the existence of this particular being sitting opposite the psychotherapist. (p. 37; italics in original)

May goes on to describe the being or existence of a client as precisely that which withstands an exhaustive analysis of drives, instincts, and mechanisms; it is what remains as the essence of the person after any and all attempts to reduce the nature of the person to such fragmented, isolated parts of the whole. The being of the client is the living reality of the person who comes alive to the therapist in a moment-by-moment encounter within the process of therapy and that always transcends the level of objective knowledge about the client. May passionately argues for this view because of his belief that a merely technical treatment of the client, which identifies the client with specific things known about him or her, results in the loss of the actual person whom the therapist is supposed to be helping. The grasping of the being of the client is thus the most important aspect of therapy.

In addition to a general discussion concerning the therapeutic importance of grasping and encountering the being of the client, May (1983) further specifies the meaning of a client’s being in light of its significance for the therapeutic process. In *The Discovery of Being*, he states:

> It is unfortunate that, when used as a general noun in English, the term *being* connotes a static substance. . . . Rather, *being* should be understood, when used as a general noun, to mean *potentia*, the source of potentiality; *being* is the potentiality by which the acorn becomes the oak or each of us becomes what he truly is. And when used in a particular sense, such as a human being, it always has the dynamic connotation of someone in process, the person being something. . . . We can understand another human being only as we see what he is moving toward, what he is becoming; and we can know ourselves only as we “project our *potentia* in action.” The significant tense for human beings is thus the *future*—that is to say, the critical question is what I am pointing toward, what I will be in the immediate future. (p. 97; italics in original)

This quote not only demonstrates the centrality of being to May’s (1983) understanding of human nature but also implies more specifically its centrality related to the purpose and goal of psychotherapy. He speaks directly to this point when he states:
The aim of therapy is that the patient experience his existence as real. The purpose is that he become aware of his existence as fully as possible, which includes becoming aware of his potentialities and becoming able to act on the basis of them. (p. 162; italics in original)

The ultimate purpose and goal of therapy, then, is for the client to more fully experience his or her existence, his or her being. It is highly significant that May refers explicitly to “potentialities” within this context, as he also defines being as an individual’s pattern of potentialities. He specifically reinterprets the concept of repression, defining it in terms of the denial of one’s potentialities (May, 1983). This point is of crucial importance, as evidenced by May’s citing of an assertion from Gabriel Marcel concerning the repression of the ontological sense, the suppression of an awareness of one’s being. In agreement with this assertion, May (1967) states, “Marcel rightly suggests that it is precisely this ontological repression, rather than repression of instincts, which underlies the deepest aspects of modern Western man’s neurosis” (p. 133). The uncovering of this repression of being and the challenge to honestly confront and actualize the potentialities of being are the primary concern of psychotherapy.

Freedom, Will, and Intentionality: Actualizing the Potentialities Within One’s Being

Having established that the goal and purpose of psychotherapy, for May, is the deeper experience of, and direct confrontation with, the potentialities of the client’s being, the question arises as to how this actually occurs in therapy. Essential to an answer to this question are the dynamic processes of freedom and will. As will be shown, it is the dynamic nature of these processes that makes it possible for a client in therapy to experience and actualize the potentialities of his or her being.

It is interesting to note that along with the previously cited formulations concerning the purpose of psychotherapy, May (1981) also states:

I propose that the purpose of the psychotherapy is to set people free. Free, as far as possible, from symptoms . . . free from compulsions. . . . But most of all, I believe that the therapist’s function should be to help people become free to be aware of and to experience their possibilities. A psychological problem . . . is like fever; it indicates that something is wrong within the structure of the person and that a struggle is going on for survival. This, in turn, is a proof to us that some other way of behaving is possible. . . . Problems are the
outward signs of unused inner possibilities. . . . People rightly come
to the therapist because they have become inwardly enslaved and
they yearn to be set free. (pp. 19-20; italics in original)

May describes freedom as an active dynamic process, always
changing, never static, constantly in motion. Its nature is to alter
its nature, to become something other than what it is at any given
moment. It signifies the possibility of developing or denying one’s
inherent potentialities. It is clear, then, that for May the purpose of
psychotherapy is simultaneously the experience of one’s being and
the experience of freedom. Indeed, these are, in fact, one and the
same experience. One is only able to confront and actualize the
potentialities of one’s being to the extent that one is experiencing
authentic freedom. Conversely, one is only free to actualize inner
potentialities to the extent that one is authentically experiencing
one’s being.

Embedded within May’s conception of freedom is his under-
standing of the dynamic process of will. Freedom is actually most
clearly evident when the dynamic of willing is strongly mani-
fested by a client in therapy. May (1981) demonstrates this point
when he states:

In psychotherapy the closest we can get to discerning freedom in
action is when a person experiences “I can” or “I will.” When a
client in therapy says either of these, I always make sure he knows
that I have heard him; for “can” and “will” are statements of per-
sonal freedom, even if only in fantasy. These verbs point to some
event in the future, either immediate or long-term. They also imply
that the person who uses them senses some power, some possibil-
ity, and is aware of ability to use this power. (p. 53)

May in turn relates this understanding of will to the dynamic prin-
ciple of intentionality, which he sees as underlying and constitut-
ing the process of a client’s willing. In Love and Will, May (1969)
directly identifies the two terms and, similarly to his statements in
the previous quote, emphasizes that they both signify the future
tense. Will and intentionality, as dynamic processes, represent a
decisive commitment within and issuing forth from the client, a
commitment to actualize some potentiality for fuller being. Indeed,
May states, “Power is potentiality, and potentiality points toward
the future: it is something to be realized” (p. 243).

To properly understand May’s description of intentionality and
the fundamentally important place he considered it to occupy
within the therapeutic process, it must be remembered that he
defined it as the structure that gives meaning to experience. It is crucial to recognize the presence of meaning at the center of intentionality, particularly in regard to May’s view of the therapeutic relationship and process. In speaking of the role of intentionality within the therapeutic process, he states, “Intentionality is based upon a meaning-matrix which patient and therapist share. Every person, sane or insane, lives in a meaning-matrix which he, to some extent, makes” (May, 1969, p. 261). Therapy is essentially an interactive process between client and therapist, in which each mutually participates in a co-constituted and ever-evolving matrix of meaning. The task of the therapist is to be conscious of the client’s intentionality at any given moment, to understand the particular meanings that a client is intending, and to heighten the client’s consciousness in regard to further meanings that need to be created. In this way, the client is empowered to form a meaningful structure for his or her experience, making it possible for deeper potentialities to come into being (May, 1969).

ESSENTIAL DIMENSIONS OF THE PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC PROCESS

Wish

An understanding of May’s emphasis on intentionality and meaning within the therapeutic process leads to a greater appreciation for his formulation of its respective dimensions. The first dimension, that of wish, occurs on the level of awareness and refers to those wishes and desires that are present in awareness but are not yet conscious. The task of the therapist in this dimension is to help the client to become more aware of what he or she wants, that is, to increase the client’s capacity to actively desire and want. This involves an uncovering of the repressions that have blocked his or her desiring and wanting from awareness and thus seeks to oppose and alter a passive and apathetic attitude toward life that the client has chosen (May, 1969).

Will

The second dimension is concerned with the transmuting of awareness into self-consciousness. Such transmutation represents
the integration of wish into a higher level of consciousness. Now the client, beyond a mere vague and naive awareness of particular wishes, experiences himself or herself as the one who has these wishes, as the unique individual who is wishing. The task of the therapist in this dimension is to facilitate an experience in which the client becomes conscious of his or her identity as a self-directed, self-constituting being. In this way, the client moves from wish to will (May, 1969).

**Decision and Responsibility**

The third dimension of the therapeutic process is that of decision and responsibility. It integrates wish and will into a still higher level of consciousness, one that is characterized by an active responsiveness toward one’s world. Concerning this, May (1969) states:

*Decision*, in our sense, creates out of the two previous dimensions a pattern of acting and living which is empowered and enriched by wishes, asserted by will, and is responsive to and responsible for the significant other-persons who are important to one’s self in the realizing of the long-term goals. (p. 267; italics in original)

The task of the therapist in this dimension is to be a catalyst for the dynamic processes of decision and responsibility, through helping the client make responsible choices toward further self-realization, integration, and maturity. A truly responsive decision is, for the client, a commitment; it is a commitment demanding more than merely wish, will, or their summation as isolated parts, indeed, it is a commitment that demands nothing less than intending with his or her whole being. In this way, a client moves from wish and will to responsive decision (May, 1969).

**CONCLUSION**

A deeper understanding of the relationship between May’s conceptions of willing and being culminates in another of his vital conceptions, one that provides provocative closure for the present discussion, that of self-affirmation. This concept appears to signify well both the process and outcome of becoming the full and whole person one is capable of being. As May (1972/1998) states:
Thus man becomes a self only as he participates in his development and throws his weight behind this or that tendency, no matter how limited this choice may be. The self never develops automatically; man becomes a self only to the extent that he can know it, affirm it, assert it. (p. 141)

Implicit within this description of self-affirmation is the presence of dynamic struggle, the at times paralyzing yet ultimately liberating truth that we as human beings become ourselves only through a fierce commitment to a mercifully ruthless process that must involve the pain inherent to struggle. We have to fight hard to become who we are meant to be (Kiser, 2004). May draws on the wisdom of Nietzsche in articulating this dynamic of “becoming through struggle,” a thinker who is probably one of the greatest sources of expertise regarding such a crucially important idea. He states:

Being is manifested only in the process of actualizing its power. . . . Power becomes actualized in those situations in which opposition is overcome. Nietzsche saw this aspect of the will and gave us a way of gauging it: “I estimate the power of a will according to how much resistance, pain, and torture it endures and knows how to transform to its own advantage.” . . . He believed that this is necessarily so—ease and affluence are the enemies and corrode and undermine the development of the authentic self. Life is a pitting of the self against difficulties; we hear Nietzsche saying time and again: “Life consists of self-overcoming.” (May, 1972/1998, pp. 144-145; italics in original)

Significantly, and as the inspiration for the beginning of this article’s title, it was of course Nietzsche (1886/1974) who stated, “What does your conscience say?—You shall become the person you are” (p. 219).

To the extent that the process of self-affirmation is indeed about self-overcoming, it is a radical call to a truly revolutionary way of existing in the world (Kiser, in press). It is a daunting challenge toward a passionate overcoming of both the internal and external resistance that arises when individuals attempt to authentically affirm their own beings. Such resistance manifests in individual fears and apathy related to actualizing inner potentialities, in the self opposing itself, and in tactics such as threats, intimidation, manipulation, and physical assault perpetrated by others in attempts to suppress the process of authentic self-affirmation within the individual.

The fundamental question that each individual must answer for himself or herself is: Are you willing to struggle through the pain of...
overcoming your own internal resistance and the resistance of others in order to become who you really are? As professional psychotherapists, we must seriously assess our own commitments to such self-overcoming, for the possibility of a client’s personal revolution is contingent, to a considerable degree, on that of the professional with whom he or she is working. In truth, our most urgent need as professionals in a field that is supposed, essentially, to be about psychological healing is to learn the subtle and difficult art of being, in May’s words, “wounded healers” (Schneider & May, 1995). The context of psychotherapy is of course a primary source for this revolutionary work of self-affirmation; however, it must not end there. May’s vision demands that the power of transformation find its way into the heart of our decaying society, a culture whose value system is predicated on a pathetic addiction to comfort, ease, and false security. The ultimate goal, then, is a revitalized culture of wounded healers which, hopefully, will lead to a redeemed world full of wounded healers, individuals who affirm the power of their own being, and, in doing so, will affirm the primal power of Being or Existence itself.

REFERENCES