Sacred Dialectic: The Centrality of Paradox in the Worldview of Rollo May

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This article explores the fundamental significance of paradox to the worldview of Rollo May. The theme and concept of paradox is seen as constituting the essence of his thought and is believed to have strongly influenced his conception of the human psyche, health and dysfunction, and socio-cultural dynamics. Through an analysis of primary sources in May’s writings, it is demonstrated that his philosophical worldview is most accurately represented by the principle of paradox, or dialectic. Specifically, both the basic characteristics of this principle, as well as its many manifestations in the form of particular paradoxes, are discussed. This discussion emphasizes the value of paradox to May’s worldview and its role in shaping his critique of psychology and culture. The article concludes with an emphasis on the importance of May’s view of paradox as a vital contribution to the field of psychology and broader culture, as well as its specific applicability to our own individual struggles to achieve integration and wholeness.

It is clear that many themes, concepts, and issues could be said to be central to the worldview of Rollo May. However, what is particularly striking in May’s thought is the core principle that appears to underlie all of his primary concerns. This is the principle of dialectic, or paradox. An analysis of May’s primary works suggests that the conception of paradox is in fact the foundation of his philosophical worldview. It is at the center of his beliefs concerning human nature, psychological health and dysfunction, and his critiques of the field of psychology and culture. Indeed, it could be legitimately stated that May’s worldview cannot be properly understood apart from the principle of paradox.

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THE FUNDAMENTAL PARADOX: THE DIALECTIC OF BEING AND NON-BEING

Perhaps the most appropriate way to begin an exploration of Rollo May’s worldview in regard to paradox is with an inquiry into its primary characteristics. In *The Discovery of Being* (1983), May makes the following statement concerning his view of existential therapy. “The fundamental contribution of existential therapy is its understanding of man as being” (p. 91, italics in original). It is clear, then, that for May the understanding of human nature as being is of crucial importance. He goes on to define being within the context of the existential term Dasein, describing it as signifying a person in a constant process of becoming what he or she truly is and is meant to be. Thus, he says:

Rather, *being* should be understood...to mean *potentia*, the source of potentiality...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. (p. 97, italics in original)

So, it is apparent that this conception of being, that of a person in a perpetual process of actualizing his or her inner potentialities, is central to May’s worldview. However, there remains a question as to the relation of such a conception to the principle of dialectic, or paradox. May addresses this relation in the following statements:

Man (or *Dasein*) is the particular being who has to be aware of himself, be responsible for himself, if he is to become himself. He also is that particular being who knows that at some future moment he will not be; he is the being who is always in a dialectical relation with nonbeing, death. (May, 1983, p. 97, italics in original)

And also:

...nonbeing is an inseparable part of being. To grasp what it means to exist, one needs to grasp the fact that he might not exist... Existence, never automatic, not only can be sloughed off and forfeited but is indeed at every instant threatened by nonbeing. Without this awareness of nonbeing—that is, awareness of the threats to one’s being in death, anxiety, and the less dramatic but persistent threats of loss of potentialities in conformism—existence is vapid, unreal, and characterized by lack of concrete self-awareness. But with the confronting of nonbeing, existence takes on vitality and immediacy, and the individual experiences a heightened consciousness of himself, his world, and others around him. (p. 105)
May perceives human nature to be a dynamic dialectic in which being and non-being are paradoxically interdependent in relation to one another. In sharp contrast to a strictly dualistic view which posits them as complete opposites, May sees them as mutually influencing and contributing to one another. The heightened consciousness and actualization of one’s being, or potentialities, comes only through an experience of its opposite, non-being. The threat of the absence of being is the catalyst and stimulant for its further expression. Thus, May asserts, “Each of us is always in a dialectical relation to his potentialities...” (May, 1983, p. 116). The foundational paradox for May is the dialectical relation between the opposite poles of being and non-being, and his more specific paradoxes are particular manifestations of it.

This ultimate paradox of being and non-being is further evident in *The Psychology of Existence: An Integrative, Clinical Perspective* (Schneider & May, 1995). Interestingly, this was his last work and was intended to communicate his vision concerning existential psychology. It is significant that in this work the term *paradox principle* is used in reference to the explication of existential-integrative theory, which posits a formulation of the human psyche as a dynamic polarity of consciousness. The polarity is described as a constrictive-expansive continuum, comprising both constrictive and expansive potentialities. Constrictive potentialities represent the experiential state of smallness, which is associated with a sense of retreating, diminishing, shrinking, emptying, and falling, that is, with reducing possibilities. Expansive potentialities represent the experiential state of greatness, which is associated with a sense of gaining, enlarging, ascending, dispersing, and filling, that is, with increasing possibilities.

It is tempting, though unwarranted, to assume a direct parallel between the constrictive-expansive polarity and the dialectic of being and non-being. Although a significant correlation is apparent between the conceptions of being and expansion on the one hand, and constriction and non-being on the other, it seems equally clear that the conclusion of an exact parallel is illegitimate. To the extent that non-being signifies a transition between modes of existence with their consequent responses to respective potentialities, it is not so much identified exclusively with constriction as it represents more a coming into being and fuller expression of whichever pole has been repressed. This seems to be confirmed by the authors’ conception of what they have termed centering, which refers to the “capacity to be aware of and to direct one’s constrictive or expansive possibilities” (Schneider & May, 1995, p. 139). The choice to center one’s consciousness, which involves a simultaneous awareness of and confrontation with both polar potentialities, means that one moves from a polarized position in the continuum of consciousness. In this way, a dynamic and balanced integration between the constrictive and expansive poles is a manifestation of the being and non-being dialectic, or paradox.
ESSENTIAL PARADOXES OF ROLLO MAY

Subject and Object

The primary paradox under this heading appears to be that of subject and object. May states, in *Psychology and the Human Dilemma* (1967), "The human dilemma is that which arises out of a man’s capacity to experience himself as both subject and object at the same time" (p. 8, italics in original). This statement indicates May’s basic conviction that human nature is essentially constituted by the paradoxical relation of the subjective and objective dimensions within consciousness. Indeed, he goes on to state:

Nor is it quite accurate to speak of our being subject and object simultaneously. The important point is that our consciousness is a process of oscillation between the two. Indeed, is not this dialectical relationship between experiencing myself as subject and as object just what consciousness consists of? The process of oscillation gives me potentiality—I can choose between them, can throw my weight on one side or the other...when we are dealing with ourselves, it is the gap between the two ways of responding that is important. My freedom, in any genuine sense, lies not in my capacity to live as “pure subject,” but rather in my capacity to experience both modes, to live in the dialectical relationship. (p. 9, italics in original).

Here we see May specifying the relationship of the subjective and objective dimensions as a dialectic. Not only is his explicit use of the term “dialectical” important, but his concurrent use of the term “oscillation” is also quite significant. His description of human consciousness in terms of this process clearly implies a paradoxical relationship between the opposite poles of subject and object, which the repetition of “dialectical” serves to further establish. It is evident from this quote that May was primarily concerned with discovering constructive ways to experience oneself as both subject and object, and that on the basis of his identifying this paradox as the “human dilemma,” it is central to his worldview.

A further and significant way in which this paradox is central to May’s worldview is seen in his impassioned critique of Western psychology and culture. The essence of this critique is visible in his definition of existentialism as:

the endeavor to understand man by cutting below the cleavage between subject and object which has bedeviled Western thought and science since shortly after the Renaissance. This cleavage Binswanger calls ‘the cancer of all psychology up to now...the cancer of the doctrine of subject-object cleavage of the world’. (1958, p. 11)

Clearly, then, at the center of May’s worldview was a strong belief that existentialism represents a cure for the “cancer” of the subject-object dichotomy through its ability to integrate these opposites in the form of a paradox.
Freedom and Destiny

It is undeniable that the paradox of freedom and destiny occupies a central place in Rollo May’s worldview, and may be viewed as a more particular manifestation of the subject-object paradox. It is evident in various forms in many of his works, but, of course, is discussed most specifically and extensively in that of *Freedom and Destiny* (1981). Concerning the relation of freedom to destiny May states simply but boldly, “The freedom of each of us is in proportion to the degree with which we confront and live in relation to our destiny” (p. 89). Clearly, on the basis of this statement, May did not construct a false dichotomy or duality in his attempt to understand the relationship of freedom and destiny. In stark contrast, he goes to rather great lengths to argue against such a position, repeatedly pointing out the serious dangers of separating them and assuming that they are mutually exclusive.

May argues that, paradoxically, the promoting of freedom to the exclusion of destiny does not lead to greater freedom, but only to freedom’s impoverishment. If there are in fact no limiting boundaries to give meaningful structure to one’s choices, then anarchy and utter chaos are the result, a condition which certainly does not make one free. As destiny represents the source of the natural “givens” and vital design of one’s life, the denial of it banishes that with which freedom engages and confronts, rendering one’s freedom impotent. Conversely, he argues that the promoting of destiny to the exclusion of freedom can, of course, lead to a form of determinism that stifles freedom. However, paradoxically, a strong engagement and confrontation with one’s destiny does not lead to such determinism, but instead to an enhancement of freedom due to the challenge it presents to that very freedom (May, 1981).

May illustrates these arguments beautifully in the following words:

Destiny and freedom form a paradox, a dialectical relationship. By this I mean that they are opposites that need each other—like day and night, summer and winter, God and the devil. Out of the encountering of the forces of destiny come our possibilities, our opportunities. In the engaging of destiny our freedom is born, just as with the coming of light the day overcomes the night ... These statements sound like a clear contradiction. But they are paradoxes instead. Freedom is by no means the absence of destiny. If there were no destiny to confront—no death, no illness, no fatigue, no limitations of any sort and no talents to pose against these limitations—we would never develop any freedom. The meaning of the dialectical relation between freedom and destiny is that, even though they are opposites, they are still bound together. They imply each other. If destiny changes, freedom must change, and vice versa ... Each not only makes the other possible; each stimulates activity in the other pole, gives power and energy to the other. Thus we can truly speak of destiny being born out of freedom and freedom being born out of destiny. (1981, pp. 95–96)

Again, we will note the explicit use of the terms “paradox” and “dialectical,” although it is obvious that the entire thrust of this description of the relation between
freedom and destiny unmistakably reveals the paradoxical and dialectical nature of this relation in May’s understanding.

Life and Death

The paradox of life and death is intimately woven into the writings of Rollo May and is discernible throughout his many discussions of paradox. It could, perhaps, be stated that if he had not believed passionately in the paradoxical relation of life and death he would not have been able to conceive of the many distinct paradoxes that he developed. May held that life and death are not opposed to one another but that they in fact constitute a totality of experience. He thought that something vital and indispensable is missing in an individual’s experience when either aspect of life or death is excluded. Thus, life and death are interdependent and need one another for their respective meaning. May seems to place greater emphasis on the immense value of death for life’s significance, as he extensively argues the point that without an awareness of death one’s life loses all vitality and becomes meaningless. It is in the poignancy of our transient existence that we experience the fullness and purpose of our lives; our experience of life deepens and intensifies to the degree that we realize it can be taken from us at any moment. Thus May states:

The awareness of death sharpens our sense of being. I know this sounds paradoxical, but I am not using the words loosely. The capacity to face death is the means by which we gain freedom. Man is the being who can know that at some future moment he will not be: He is always in a dialectical relationship with his own death. (1999, p. 45)

However, May also emphasized the great value of life for the reality of death. Death is meaningful because new life emerges from it. This is seen in his discussion of the creative process, which he views as embodying the dialectical interaction between life and death. The act of creation itself requires that the old form be destroyed, that it die, so that a new form may emerge. A current form of thinking, representing a false security, must die in order that a new original form of thinking may be born (May, 1999). In this way the life and death dialectic form a recursive process and consequential totality of experience. Life breeds death, which breeds further life, which breeds death…and so on. A significant parallel to this description is evident in May’s discussion of self-transcendence in Existence: A New Dimension in Psychiatry and Psychology (1958). In his discussion of self-transcendence he describes it in terms of emergent evolution, of the surpassing of a state of being so that a further, potential state of being may emerge. It is also important to note that he defines this process within the context of what “existence” itself means, thereby placing it at the center of existential theory.

The paradox of life and death, and particularly the denial of the death aspect of this paradox, is central to May’s critique of psychology and culture. He emphati-
cally addresses the various forms of this denial in Western culture, returning constantly to his conclusion that the repression of death is responsible for the culture’s disintegration (May, 1953). The dominant cultural value system has become defined by the repression of death, and the effect this has had on the life of our culture has been to render it empty, hollow, and unreal. May remarks:

The ironic fact that comes out of this denial is that the denial of death is also the loss of life. It denies the reality of human existence, and is a source of a great deal of the apathy that so many people in our modern Western world feel. (1999, p. 41)

Within this context, May also takes Western psychology to task, emphasizing ways in which the field has perpetuated the cultural repression of death. By dichotomizing life and death, while promoting anything that superficially resembles “life” as healthy and anything that superficially resembles “death” as unhealthy, the field of psychology has contributed to the cultural view that life and death are separate and opposed to one another (1999).

Finally, it is important at this point to address the way in which May associated this paradox with his conception of beauty, which occupies an important place in his worldview. Similar to his argument that death revitalizes life, he asserted that beauty is created out of the paradoxical relation of life and death. Concerning the relation of “beauty to the human paradox of life and death,” he states, “Only when we confront death, in some form or other, only when we realize that life is fragile, do we create beauty” (1985, p. 70). Beauty emerges from the dialectic of life and death, when a confrontation with the tragic element of death leads to a renewed and intensified experience of life. Thus, May appropriately states, “It is a very puzzling thought that without death, there would be no beauty” (p. 71, italics in original). It is significant, as well, to acknowledge the strong parallel between this paradox of life and death and the fundamental paradox of being and non-being. As non-being stimulates and furthers the emergence of being, so does death stimulate and further the emergence of life.

Paradox and Anxiety

A discussion of Rollo May’s worldview would be incomplete without addressing his understanding of anxiety. May’s formulation of the nature and function of anxiety is particularly striking precisely because it is based on the principle of paradox. In his landmark work, The Meaning of Anxiety (1977) he states:

But the purpose of anxiety is still to protect us from dangers that threaten...our existence or values that we identify with our existence. This normal anxiety of life cannot be avoided except at the price of apathy or the numbing of one’s sensibilities and imagination. The omnipresence of anxiety arises from the fact that, when all is said
and done, anxiety is our human awareness of the fact that each of us is a *being confronted with nonbeing* ... anxiety is the reaction when a person faces some kind of destruction of his existence or that which he identifies with it. (pp. 363–364, italics in original)

Thus, to begin with, May is stating something paradoxical in his assertion that anxiety is a normal and unavoidable “given” in regard to the human condition. It is paradoxical in the sense that it contradicts our prevalent cultural value which holds that anxiety is inherently unhealthy or is in itself a manifestation of sickness. The first hint of paradox is evident, then, in May’s working definition of anxiety.

Characteristics of paradox are further discernible in May’s discussion of anxiety within the context of self-realization, or the development of the self. May argues that anxiety is at the very center of the self’s development and is in fact what facilitates its ongoing realization. Such realization involves the actualizing of one’s inner potentialities, the many possibilities concerning all that an individual can become. To actualize these possibilities, however, one must confront the anxiety that arises from the fact that one is giving up present security to venture into experiential areas that are new and unknown. This means, essentially, that one must willingly sacrifice a present mode of existence in order to embrace a fuller and more authentic mode of existence. The paradox in this process is that when one experiences a threat to the present mode of existence (anxiety), rather than attempting to protect and preserve that mode of existence by fleeing from it (repression of anxiety), one confronts it directly and thus emerges more whole and intact. The apparent protection of one’s self through repression actually serves to impoverish and constrict one’s existence, while experiencing the anxiety directly, and relinquishing one’s self actually leads to the further development and expansion of one’s existence (May, 1977). One will note the presence of the fundamental paradox in this description. Individuals further develop and express their being only through the experience of non-being.

**Paradox and the Daimon**

May’s conception of what he termed the *daimon* is of great significance to his thought, and is particularly significant for the purpose of this article in light of its clear representation of paradox. In *Love and Will* (1969), May says the following about the *daimon*:

> The daimonic is the urge in every being to affirm itself, assert itself, perpetuate and increase itself. The daimonic becomes evil when it usurps the total self without regard to the integration of that self ... It then appears as excessive aggression, hostility,
cruelty ... But these are the reverse side of the same assertion which empowers our creativity. All life is a flux between these two aspects of the daimonic. (p. 123)

The daimon, for May, is the basis on which a person actualizes his or her unique potentialities; it is the primal force of psychic energy which is the source of both “good” and “evil” potentialities in the self. It is a paradox in that it comprises both extremes of potentialities, which are both conflicting and complementary.

May argues that the opposing polar potentialities are interdependent and inseparable; indeed, they cannot be divided from one another as each partakes of the same essential energy. The exclusion of one necessitates the loss of the other, as May explains:

For the destructive activities of the daimonic are only the reverse side of its constructive motivation. If we throw out our devils, As Rilke aptly observes, we had better be prepared to bid goodbye to our angels as well. In the daimonic lies our vitality ... the daimonic needs to be directed and channeled. Here is where human consciousness becomes so important. (1969, pp. 125–126)

May places great emphasis on the crucial role of consciousness in the experience of the daimon. The conscious choice to express both polar potentialities is what makes it possible for a healthy integration and balance to be established between them. The challenge is to experience the daimon as a guide to such integration and balance, realizing that the energy underlying each pole is the source of potential wholeness. An excessive form of expression is unhealthy, or evil, only because one’s energy has become polarized, thus destroying the creative tension between the opposing yet complementary potentialities.

CONCLUSION: THE POWER OF REDEMPTIVE PARADOX

The fact that paradox is at the center of his worldview says a great deal about Rollo May. That he struggled courageously throughout his life to balance and integrate the opposing forces of the psyche, while forming this struggle into a vision that he passionately communicated to the world, is a valuable gift to those of us seeking wholeness in our lives. May’s vision speaks so powerfully to our own search for integration and balance because the reality of paradox is what makes it possible for us to experience our lives as meaningful. The specific paradoxes discussed constitute the challenge on which our lives depend, that is, to integrate the dialectical polarities of our individual beings: subject and object, freedom and destiny, life and death. These are all expressions of the ultimate dialectical polarity of being and
non-being, within which we encounter and struggle with our dark angels, anxiety, and the *daimon*.

In our more conscious and enlightened moments we know that we are fragmented, broken, and at times hopelessly divided against ourselves. There is only one way to redeem the broken fragments of our beings into a balanced wholeness; there is only one way in which we can create beauty and meaning from the agony of our internal wars, and that is through the experience of paradox. When the opposing forces of our beings are channeled into a state of constructive tension, we experience the wholeness of our beings, our suffering and pain are meaningful, and thus, also, are our lives. The dialectic that is paradox is sacred because it restores our sanctity, our integrity, a state of being in which the depths of our tragedy are simultaneously the glory of our salvation.

**REFERENCES**


**AUTHOR NOTE**

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