

An Existential Approach to Psychological Obstacles and Clinical Treatments

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to integrate knowledge of clinical psychology and psychiatry with existential philosophy to understand the theories and treatment modalities of existential psychologists. This paper centers around existential psychology pioneers Ludwig Binswanger and Rollo May, and how their work connects to existential philosophers. This paper broadens the understanding of clinical psychology by incorporating a philosophical perspective into the human mind. Existential psychology is a framework to better understand and treat cases of anxiety, despair, and other maladaptive thoughts or behaviors.

Keywords: clinical psychology, existential philosophy, existential psychiatry, Ludwig Binswanger, Rollo May, Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger

Introduction

The fields of philosophy and psychology exhibit distinct differences in their aims and definitions. Philosophy is broadly defined as “the use of reason in understanding such things as the nature of the real world and existence, the use and limits of knowledge, and the principles of moral judgment”.¹ While philosophy is considered more of an academic discipline, psychology focuses on scientific application. Psychology refers to “the scientific study of the way the human mind works and how it influences behavior”.² Since psychology utilizes the scientific method, its purpose is to arrive at concrete answers to questions about behavior, thinking, or actions. Psychologists seek to describe, understand, treat, and predict maladaptive or abnormal behavior, whereas philosophy is more exploratory: seeking to make sense of the world from different perspectives rather than come to concrete conclusions. Existentialism is a branch of philosophy concerned with the existence of human beings.³ Existentialists explore aspects of human existence such as free will, choices, and death. The existentialist movement rose to popularity after World War II, as it became a philosophy full of engagement and hope for many, including famous existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre’s theories and ideas revolve around freedom, existence, and ethics.⁴ These issues are also important to consider through a psychological lens. The topics that existentialists write about are integral to understanding human behavior, emotions, and thoughts. Those who struggle to understand how their actions and motivations impact their goals may benefit from existential therapy.⁵ Our actions, motivations, and goals for the future are frequent topics of existentialists. These topics create anxiety, hopelessness, and even despair for many people who are overwhelmed with the possibilities of their current life and prospective future. By applying existential philosophy to the field of psychology, clinicians help people better understand their identity and purposes in life. Ludwig Binswanger and Rollo May are two prominent figures in existential psychology whose invaluable contributions hold strong ties to existentialist philosophers. Existential psychology is a valuable theoretical orientation and can help people cope with maladaptive thoughts and behaviors to ultimately lead more fulfilling and happier lives.

Brief History of the Existential Psychology Movement

Therapeutic interventions are based on theoretical orientations, either one or a combination of approaches. Before existential therapy came into practice, the branch of existential psychology underwent its own movement. Although existentialism as a philosophy was first developed in the mid 19th century,⁶ Swiss psychiatrist Ludwig Binswanger (1881-1966) is considered to be the most influential leading figure in existential psychiatry.⁷ In the mid 20th century, Binswanger founded the branch of existential

¹ “Philosophy,” Cambridge Dictionary, accessed November 16, 2024, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/philosophy>.

² “Psychology.” Cambridge Dictionary. Accessed November 16, 2024.

<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/psychology>.

³ Richard Kamber, *On Sartre* (Australia: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2000), 4.

⁴ Richard Kamber, *On Sartre* (Australia: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2000), 2.

⁵ “Existential Therapy,” Psychology Today, September 9, 2022, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapy-types/existential-therapy>.

⁶ Richard Kamber, *On Sartre* (Australia: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2000), 4.

⁷ Ghaemi, S. Nassir. “Rediscovering Existential Psychotherapy: The Contribution of Ludwig Binswanger.” *Psychiatry Online*, 2001. <https://www.psychiatryonline.org/doi/10.1176/appi.psychotherapy.2001.55.1.51>.

psychiatry, which was inspired by the work of existentialist philosophy. Specifically, he incorporates Martin Heidegger's theory of *Dasein* to explain the existential structure of people's lives, specifically psychiatric patients.

Dasein is defined in Heidegger's *Being and Time* as human existence, or the essence of human beings.⁸ Binswanger was interested in explaining psychological disorders through a philosophical perspective, and subsequently interpreted that mental illnesses were rooted in abnormal existential structures of being. For example, if an individual experiences a traumatic event, Binswanger's logic hypothesizes that this event alters the structure of the person's existence, leading them to lose their sense of self and existential place within the world. By combining existential phenomenology with clinical psychiatry, Binswanger sought to explain how different abnormal existential structures could explain issues such as anxiety, panic attacks, or depression. One case study of Binswanger's patient depicts a young woman who struggled with an undiagnosed eating disorder. Binswanger concludes that for the woman, "The dread of becoming fat has revealed itself as a concretization of a severe existential dread".⁹ The young woman ended up taking her own life, an act which Binswanger sees as ending her own existence, thus the truest act of exhibiting authentic existence. He speculates that some individuals may only live an authentic existence through suicide. However, many argue his patient's suicide demonstrates the ineffectiveness of his treatment approaches. His theories were rooted in a psychiatric approach which focuses on the physical aspects of psychological disorders, often seeking to treat with medication or other medical interventions. While Binswanger's theories and interventions are viewed by some as lacking scientific evidence, especially by today's standards, his contributions to existential psychiatry and later psychology are undeniable.

Around the end of Binswanger's life, a new American psychologist, Rollo May (1909-1994), emerged as a leading figure in the existential psychology movement. While Binswanger was a pioneer of the existential psychiatry field, May is credited with officially founding and introducing existential psychology to American psychologists who were largely unfamiliar with the field, unlike their European counterparts. Before becoming a clinical psychologist, May found his passion for English and divinity in college.¹⁰ After taking a summer seminar with a psychotherapist, May developed an interest in counseling with a focus on personality growth and well-being. He then pursued his interest in psychology in graduate school after two years of unhappily working as a minister. May became particularly inspired when he was quarantined in a hospital with tuberculosis, reading the work of psychologist Sigmund Freud and early existentialist Søren Kierkegaard.¹¹ He began to question the role philosophy could play in psychology. After his recovery, he gave many lectures about his research on anxiety, growth, and existential psychology. A turning point in both May's career and the development of existential psychology was the American Psychological Association Annual Convention in 1959.¹² May presented a book he co-authored

⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, 7th ed. (Oxford, England: Blackwell, 1967).

⁹ S. Nassir Ghaemi, "Rediscovering Existential Psychotherapy: The Contribution of Ludwig Binswanger," *Psychiatry Online*, 2001, <https://www.psychiatryonline.org/doi/10.1176/appi.psychotherapy.2001.55.1.51>, 62.

¹⁰ "About Rollo May | Life and Work," Rollo May, accessed November 26, 2024, <https://www.rollomay.net/about-rollo-may/>.

¹¹ "About Rollo May | Life and Work," Rollo May, accessed November 26, 2024, <https://www.rollomay.net/about-rollo-may/>.

¹² Jane Spear, "Existential Psychology - History of the Movement," *JRank Psychology Encyclopedia*, accessed November 26, 2024, <https://psychology.jrank.org/pages/229/Existential-Psychology.html>.

and edited called *Existential Psychology*. The book is a collaboration between May and renowned psychologists Gordon Allport, Herman Feifel, Abraham Maslow, and Carl Rogers. May presented the book at the convention's Symposium on Existential Psychology and Psychotherapy. In the book, May writes "There is no such thing as truth or reality for a living human being except as he participates in it, is conscious of it, has some relationship to it".¹³ He emphasizes the role of conscious responsibility and meaningful decisions as a key factor in improving people's lives, explaining that an individual must take active control over their own life and consciously strive for truth. Existential psychology centers on individualism, authentic commitment to one's goals, and finding agency and meaning in one's life. May details how psychologists can ponder the reasons and manifestations of a patient's problem, but the most important aspect of understanding is the patient as an existing person. Rather than fixating on a list of symptoms and medical history, psychologists should focus on the whole person within the patient. To accomplish this, psychologists compassionately guide their patients towards self-actualization. Therapeutic goals may include building awareness of one's capacity for freedom, learning to embrace anxiety and unwanted thoughts, or gaining motivation and confidence to make decisions. *Existential Psychology* and the convention symposium brought about immense popularity for existential psychology, both in theory and in clinical practice.

Existential Therapy and Treatment

As existential psychology developed as a movement, existential treatments began emerging. While existential psychologists operate from a shared theoretical orientation, there are differences in how they decide to treat patients and conceptualize their problems, as is with any theoretical orientation. Both Ludwig Binswanger and Rollo May worked with patients utilizing their respective approaches to therapy, incorporating existentialist ideas that reflect much of the work of Martin Heidegger and Jean Paul-Sartre.

Ludwig Binswanger

Ludwig Binswanger focuses on diagnosing psychological disorders and abnormalities through a combined medical and existential lens.¹⁴ He writes about guiding patients through their unconscious mental processes towards conscious awareness of their existence as human beings. Binswanger adopts his idea of *Daseinsanalysis*, which is a blend of psychoanalysis and Heidegger's concept of *Dasein*. In an essay, Binswanger gives an example of melancholy, a mental disorder known today as depression. He argues melancholy is a disturbance of "the functional unity of the Dasein's ontological potentialities [...] between the bodily and mental being of Dasein".¹⁵ For someone experiencing melancholy, this creates a perpetual sense of extreme isolation and guilt. In terms of treating a disorder such as melancholy, Binswanger suggests physiological methods such as electroshock therapy or opium medication to restore

¹³ Rollo May et al., *Existential Psychology* (Random House, 1961), <https://archive.org/details/existentialpsychmayr/page/26/mode/2up>.

¹⁴ Ghaemi, S. Nassir. "Rediscovering Existential Psychotherapy: The Contribution of Ludwig Binswanger." *Psychiatry Online*, 2001.

¹⁵ Ludwig Binswanger, "Heidegger's Analytic of Existence and Its Meaning for Psychiatry," essay, in *Being-in-the-World; Selected Papers of Ludwig Binswanger*, trans. Jacob Needleman (Basic Books, 1963), 206–21, <https://archive.org/details/beingintheworlds00bins/page/220/mode/2up>, 217.

the unity of body and mind. Medical interventions have advanced greatly since then, but some, such as electroconvulsive therapy, are still utilized for severe cases of clinical depression. Binswanger also feels psychotherapy is most useful when its sole task focuses on guiding the patient towards power over their own existence. Therefore, he claims those who mock human existence become neurotic, whereas those who accept the lack of freedom that comes with the finitude of human existence become free.

Binswanger's idea of embracing life's uncertainties and recognizing individual freedom is found throughout the work of many existentialist philosophers. Philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre explores psychologically relevant topics in his novel *Nausea*. According to Sartre, there is a special kind of consciousness called Nausea, which reveals objects' direct realism and leaves an individual exhausted, disgusted, and uneasy.¹⁶ This severe psychological distress is a result of trying to comprehend one's own free will. Awareness of the abilities to make decisions and experience freedom feels overwhelming and terrifying, and many people feel hopeless and incapable of exercising their free will. A person who consciously understands their own existence and capacity for free will may become paralyzed with anxiety and horror, much like the main character in Sartre's novel. An existential psychologist helps patients recognize and understand moments of existential dread and other feelings similar to the apprehension towards existence. The psychologist helps the patient confront the anguish of freedom to ultimately take responsibility for their own life and exercise free will. From an existentialist standpoint, a patient who is experiencing these strong emotions is engaging in a form of self-deception. One of the concepts of Sartre's existential psychoanalysis is the theory of bad faith. He asserts that to avoid feelings of anguish, people avoid their free will in hopes of existing in the same way as unconscious objects.¹⁷ By avoiding practical obstacles to their goals, a person living in bad faith will deceive themselves into believing they are not free and therefore are not responsible for making decisions. Through existential therapy, people work towards their full potential by engaging in the difficult task of confronting free will and making difficult choices. Since Binswanger focuses on psychiatric diagnoses, his treatment aims to connect these philosophical theories to the behavior and thought patterns of patients. While Binswanger refrains from explicitly discussing bad faith in his therapeutic goals, his interventions are largely inspired by the work of numerous existential philosophers.

Rollo May

In his therapeutic practices, Rollo May critiques psychoanalysis, specifically Sigmund Freud's theory, in favor of his own existential approach to treating patients in his book *Existential Psychology*. Psychoanalysis focuses on the unconscious processes, desires, and impulses of an individual.¹⁸ According to Freud, psychological conflicts are due to underlying factors that must be brought out from the unconscious. Psychoanalytic therapy focuses on discussing a person's dreams, childhood, and past experiences. Like many psychologists, May finds this theory to be rather simplistic, but offers critiques rather than complete disagreement. He argues that psychoanalytic therapy allows a patient to detach from their own ability to make decisions by blaming conflicts on their unconscious. The solution to this problem

¹⁶ Richard Kamber, *On Sartre* (Australia: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2000), 68.

¹⁷ Richard Kamber, *On Sartre* (Australia: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2000).

¹⁸ Rollo May et al., *Existential Psychology* (Random House, 1961), <https://archive.org/details/existentialpsychmayr/page/26/mode/2up>.

is evident in May's form of psychotherapy that prioritizes patient responsibility as a conscious process rather than a hidden one. Existential psychologists are meant to help a patient recognize their own free will, rather than pushing them towards impulsive decisions. Furthermore, May explains how traditional psychologists tend to take on a more deterministic framework,¹⁹ viewing psychological disorders or conflicts as being caused by factors wholly outside a person's control. These factors may be internal, such as genetics or personality traits. They can also be external, such as parental and societal influence, which factors in concepts such as learned behavior. For Freud, psychological determinism looks at how a person's childhood and unconscious motives exist outside of their control. However, May argues this framework is far too limiting, instead advocating that individuals play a much more active role in their own lives. In his work as a psychotherapist, May proposes six ontological principles of people within his existential framework. These principles guided May's clinical therapy practices and case reports of patients. The sixth principle focuses on anxiety as "the state of the human being in the struggle against that which would destroy his being".²⁰ Similar to Sartre's concept of anguish, May theorizes that feelings of apprehension and unease are due to the constant revelation of one's own existence. While fear is apprehension towards a specific and credible threat, anxiety is looming apprehension about the unknown. However, May acknowledges that some degree of anxiety can help propel people towards making decisions. Psychotherapy then becomes incredibly important in helping people overcome excessive and burdensome anxiety by working through their apprehension of the unknown. However, he stresses the importance of the patient themselves learning to take control of their life through the recognition of anxiety. By playing an active role in their own lives, people can live more authentically and feel less terrified to exercise free will. May importantly notes that existing is a "continual emerging"²¹ process, therefore existential therapy teaches the patient to accept that the meaning of life constantly changes. Authenticity and transcendence come from recognizing one's own existence as continual. To accomplish this, psychologists must go beyond the person as a patient by understanding them as an existing person.

A frequent topic of May's existential psychotherapy deals with states of nonbeing. According to May in *The Discovery of Being*, the most extreme state of nonbeing is death.²² He claims death is the only absolute quality of life, and, to live authentically, people must confront death. The nature of death causes a great deal of anxiety, hopelessness, and pessimism for people. May recognizes this and addresses the topic of death in his psychotherapy. He argues that being aware of the absolute nature of death allows people to live fuller lives because they accept existence for its finite qualities. This theory reflects the ideas of Martin Heidegger in his book *Being and Time*. Heidegger's theory centers around death being the end of Dasein, and therefore the end of Being.²³ Death creates anxiety for human beings because we

¹⁹ Rollo May et al., *Existential Psychology* (Random House, 1961), <https://archive.org/details/existentialpsychmayr/page/26/mode/2up>.

²⁰ Rollo May et al., *Existential Psychology* (Random House, 1961), <https://archive.org/details/existentialpsychmayr/page/26/mode/2up>, 83.

²¹ Rollo May, *The Discovery of Being: Writings in Existential Psychology*, (W.W. Norton, 1983), chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://wiragen.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/The-Discovery-of-Being-Writings-in-Existential-Psychology-_Rollo-May_-_z-li_b.org_.pdf, 143.

²² Rollo May, *The Discovery of Being: Writings in Existential Psychology*, (W.W. Norton, 1983), chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://wiragen.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/The-Discovery-of-Being-Writings-in-Existential-Psychology-_Rollo-May_-_z-li_b.org_.pdf.

²³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, 7th ed. (Oxford, England: Blackwell, 1967).

recognize it as a projection towards the end of Being. Heidegger claims that people tend to discuss death in a manner that is impersonal and abstract in an attempt to remove it as a threat to Being. The language surrounding death is often ambiguous and euphemistic, with phrases such as “he passed away” or “she is no longer with us”. People escape the responsibility of confronting death by “giving new explanations for it, understanding it inauthentically, and concealing it”.²⁴ In the same manner as May, Heidegger reinforces the absolute nature of death and its inevitability. Heidegger’s ideas are similar to May’s, as he theorizes people need to accept death to live authentically. Both understand how fixating on death paralyzes people to the point where they evade concrete conversations surrounding it.

The second form of nonbeing May proposes is conformity.²⁵ Conformity is a state of nonbeing when an individual becomes immersed in herd mentality. When people fit their beliefs, attitudes, and actions to match a larger group, they lose all sense of individuality. A loss of uniqueness is a loss of being, or a state of nonbeing. Existential psychology focuses on individualism, centering on a patient’s unique identity and potential for being. Through existential therapy, a person works towards regaining power through their unique being. People who feel apprehensive and hopeless about their place in the world are theorized to be disconnected from their sense of being. May proposes that these people are out of touch with their individuality, and places great emphasis on free will and decision as the forefront of existential psychology.²⁶ Although people tend to experience anxiety when faced with their own free will, May theorizes that confronting this anxiety through conscious decision making helps people live more positive and fulfilling lives. The emphasis on free will is a concept that Sartre frequently explores throughout his works and is his most lasting contribution to existentialism. In his book *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre proposes that freedom is when “the motive, the act, and the end are all constituted in a single upsurge”.²⁷ Sartre’s view on freedom is considered exceptionally radical, as he claims human beings choose all their motives and that freedom expands beyond torn choices. Freedom is pervasive and exists in the totality of the motive, act, and end. Humans can never commit motiveless acts, making them eternally responsible for their decisions. This radical concept of free will is somewhat reflected in the core theories of May’s existential psychology, in the sense that his therapy focuses on self-determination and conscious choices. May emphasizes that conscious decision and responsibility are genuine truths; they are the only truths that can change a human being.²⁸ Changes in motives or emotions are outcomes of conscious decisions. Additionally, Sartre and May refute the idea of a higher power being responsible for people’s actions. Motives and characters are not predetermined and given to people but rather chosen consciously and continuously by individuals themselves. A person in existential therapy may benefit from learning how to create their own motives, allowing them to break free from the mental limits of prior motives and acts.

²⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, 7th ed. (Oxford, England: Blackwell, 1967), 298.

²⁵ Rollo May, *The Discovery of Being: Writings in Existential Psychology*, (W.W. Norton, 1983), [chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.wiragen.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/The-Discovery-of-Being-Writings-in-Existential-Psychology-Rollo-May-z-lib-org.pdf](https://www.wiragen.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/The-Discovery-of-Being-Writings-in-Existential-Psychology-Rollo-May-z-lib-org.pdf).

²⁶ Rollo May et al., *Existential Psychology* (Random House, 1961), <https://archive.org/details/existentialpsychmayr/page/26/mode/2up>, 83.

²⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre and Hazel E. Barnes, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, Internet Archive (London: Methuen & Co LTD, 1957), <https://archive.org/details/beingn-and-nothingness/mode/2up>, 438.

²⁸ Rollo May et al., *Existential Psychology* (Random House, 1961), <https://archive.org/details/existentialpsychmayr/page/26/mode/2up>, 83.

Existential psychologists teach patients that although they are unable to always choose a situation, they can always choose how to react. This is the fundamental nature of freedom.

Conclusion

Existential psychology has expanded far beyond the work of Binswanger and May as the field of psychology has evolved. Existentialism's influence on psychology and psychiatry is profound, and traces back to the 1800s. By operating from this theoretical orientation, psychologists help people deal with adverse situations, uncomfortable emotions, and existential crises. Contemporary existential psychologists continue to revisit the work of philosophers during the existential movement to understand emotions and behavior existentially and ontologically rather than simply biologically and psychologically. Existential psychotherapy helps clients realize their own authenticity, freedom, and identity. As Binswanger and May explore, each human being possesses the capacity for free will and conscious responsibility. As any clinical intervention poses limitations, existential psychology raises potential shortcomings in addressing larger systemic barriers that impact the mental health of marginalized individuals. While people in existential therapy are challenged with confronting existentially threatening concepts such as death, this may not be suitable for those suffering from severe psychiatric disorders. Self-acceptance is an ongoing process of hard work, but through existential therapy, individuals can learn to find meaning within themselves and within the world.

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