



ON FUTURE: INTERPRETATIONS ABOUT TIME IN ROLLO MAY

Sobre o Porvir: Interpretações do Tempo in Rollo May

Sobre el Futuro: Interpretaciones del Tiempo en Rollo May

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Resumo: Entre os muitos temas abordados por Rollo May (1909-1994), expoente estadunidense da Psicologia Existencial, encontra-se o tempo como experiência existencial e subjetiva; isto é, a temporalidade como espaço de organização da própria subjetividade do humano, dando ênfase na capacidade contínua deste mesmo humano de extrapolar seu “presente” criando novas significações em direção ao “futuro”. Neste breve estudo pretende-se expor um certo “conjunto de pensamentos” em que se mesclam tanto uma apresentação da perspectiva de May a respeito do tempo, o qual incide na questão do “futuro” como um fio condutor fundamental para o tecido mesmo da atividade psíquica humana (quer se trate de condições ditas “normais”, como as que são designadas como “transtorno”) e horizonte de sua existência; assim como algumas interpretações, a partir da ótica proporcionada por May, de algumas sintomáticas e adoecidas expressões de como o humano tem lidado com o tempo na atualidade.

Palavras-chave: Rollo May; Temporalidade; “Futuro”; Psicologia Existencial.

Abstract: Among the many themes addressed by Rollo May (1909-1994), American exponent of Existential Psychology, time is considered an existential and subjective experience; i.e. temporality as the organizational space of human subjectivity itself, emphasizing human’s continuous ability to extrapolate his “present” by creating new meanings toward the “future.” In this brief study, it is exposed a certain “set of thoughts”: a presentation of May’s perspective about time, which focuses on the subject of “future” as a fundamental guiding thread for human’s psychic activity (whether in terms of “normal” conditions, or those referred as “disorders”) and furthermore, the horizon of its existence. Just as some interpretations, based on the viewpoint provided by May, of some symptomatic and sickened expressions of how the human has dealt with the present time.

Keywords: Rollo May; Temporality; “Future”; Existential Psychology.

Resumen: Entre los muchos temas abordados por Rollo May (1909-1994), un exponente estadounidense de la psicología existencial, está el tiempo como una experiencia existencial y subjetiva; es decir, la temporalidad como espacio de organización de la subjetividad humana misma, enfatizando la capacidad continua del mismo humano para extrapolar su “presente” creando nuevos significados hacia el “futuro”. Este breve estudio pretende exponer un cierto “conjunto de pensamientos” en el que se mezcla una presentación de la perspectiva del tiempo de May, que se centra en la cuestión del “futuro” como un hilo fundamental para el tejido mismo de la actividad psíquica humana (si se llama condiciones “normales”, como las denominadas “trastorno”) y el horizonte de su existencia; así como algunas interpretaciones, desde la perspectiva proporcionada por May, de algunas expresiones sintomáticas y enfermas de cómo el humano ha manejado el tiempo hoy.

Palabras-clave: Rollo May; Temporalidad; “Futuro”; Psicología existencial.

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When one goes through the pages of his work *The Discovery of Being* (1983), Rollo May (1909-1994), one of the founders of the humanistic movement in psychology in the end of the 50s in the United States, it is possible to clearly perceive in his theoretical-clinician considerations the influences of phenomenological and existential contributions in psychology and psychiatry of European origin¹. It is also evident that those influences are, in truth, May's reinterpretations, rereadings for the American context in terms of reception of those psychologies. Therefore, it is worthwhile highlighting the presence of various thinkers of existential background (and May sometimes mentions or quotes works of those authors), such as Sartre, Heidegger, Jaspers or even Nietzsche. Because of this intimate contact with various philosophies of existence, many themes dealt by May in the already mentioned book, above all when he detains himself in the "contributions to therapy" of his existential psychology, (May (1974) also speaks about a "humanistic-existential" psychology), are consequences of those philosophical thoughts.

Among the problems on which May dwells, we find *time*. However, a note seems to be necessary before going forward. May does not linger in considerations of what could be time "in itself", its "nature" or something similar. Nevertheless, the eminent psychologist sees time as *experience* in the context of human historical existing. He claims that human psychic organization and its lived experiences are anchored in the dimension of time.

Not intending to dwell deeper in theme already explored by so many thinkers throughout the philosophical tradition, and going to the domain of human historical experience, time will, in this brief study (taking May's considerations as a guiding thread), neither appear as a "physical" nor natural-ontological entity which is anterior or external to human being; however, when the experiential ambience which the being accomplishes when dealing with things around himself and with itself as a lived body, since he, the human himself is also a thing among things, and therefore is subject to time. Going even further, human being is a history being realized; temporality concerns him.

With the characters already set up, I will explain in this brief study a certain "set of thoughts" that mix both a presentation about May's perspective on time, one which conducts to the matter of "*future*" as a fundamental guiding thread for the fabric itself of psychic activity (both in conditions said "normal" and those in which the human being is found to be in "disorders") and the existential horizon to feel its influences in the dimensions which the human being builds from the "past" concentrating in the "present", just as like some interpretations, from the insights provided by May, of the way by which human being has dealt with time in contemporary times, which have been configured as "sickening".

Time and Subjective Constitution

Following the trajectory of his existential thought, May claims that human existence is a continual happening which is given *in time*, and that this is in accordance with the European existential therapists, for these "literally propose a psychology of the *being*, on the contrary of a psychology of the 'it is' or of the 'was' or even of static categories" (May, 1993, p. 149). In other words, human being, for being historical, is a being which realizes itself in time, where it finds its inconstancy and impermanence of the becoming which, because of its mode, inexorably flows towards that which is called *future*. Therefore, to think about the human being through supposedly 'static' categories would be to incur into the danger of promoting conceptual incoherences which would perceive the mutable character of human being, fruit of its historicity.

In regard to the 'future', point of great importance in this study, it is conceived by May as the keystone to comprehend time in the experience and constitution of subjectivity, above all when human is to transform himself (regarding future) in some type of situation which demands from him such (re)significations as are, for example, the various psychotherapeutic propositions that are available. Whether it is perceived as a source of suffocating torment or as possible repositioning of existence, future remains an important beacon for the conformation of subjectivity. And speaking/describing "subjectivity" could be more or less as the following: it would be constituted by formations of constantly movable meanings which (re)make themselves in their own proper modes of being, crossed by their historical and cultural context of a given moment. Such ongoing framework enables us to understand subjectivity as "the mode of organizing daily experiences, the universes of sensations and representations" (Araújo, 2002, p. 81). In other words, human being is a being that thinks/feels/acts in his environment and is transformed by it. Thus, if it is ongoing; changing; in traffic; it is not ready. Still following Araújo (2002), not even that which we call subjectivity is absent from this prerogative, since.

¹ The article of Ponte e Sousa (2011) discourses, even if in an introductory level, about the contribution of May for the American Existential Psychology as well as its mutual repercussions between it and Humanistic Psychology.



(..) subjectivity, as *ethos*, will be then the space/home where our existential experiences are organized; it will be the territory in which we locate ourselves in order to establish relationships with others and to bestow meaning to lived experiences as they emerge. Under our point of view, this meaning is constituted with the production of daily experience itself. Subjectivity is produced in the social and, in the whole time, maintains with it reciprocal relations of mutual constitution (Araújo, 2002, p. 82).

Subjectivity is not the objectification of “something” which inherent to human being, but something which is constantly replaced in the game of becoming. Far from being the thirst for perfectly clear and luminous identity that “tells who we would be”, subjective conformation, if we look closely, throw in our face that we have disturbing both obscurity and opacity, since the future is not already there. Nor will it ever be. It is also perhaps from this point that comes the thirst for meaning which sometimes desolates and bothers us. Such a perspective points directly to the mobility of human being, confronting him with mystery and the demand of existing, as if challenging him to create meaning to this floating being that he is. And in a cultural context as ours, in which there are incredibly mobile and quickly evanescent relationships and significations, also expectations around the future suffer modifications, as will see in the following.

In this light, human being seems to be the only living being which is capable of excessively temporalizing and extrapolating the present time, moving himself both to the past as to the future, reuniting them in a significative whole which is for him more or less coherent, and giving it exactly the notion of having/being a *history*. In other words, if existence is this continuous emerging; a becoming; thus, the point which we should pay attention is the becoming; the future. Better understood: not as that which “did not happen” nor that which would be only in the domain of possible imagination, or like a set of supposed “events” which could be by some “clairvoyance” predicted. No. The future would work, rather, like a project which echoes in the *present* urging for movement, assisting to scale the *past*, constituting meaning by rebounding in the present and future. This “categorization” (inappropriate term in lack of a better one), which corresponds to the usual division of time, is experiential and fluid, even if clear for the human being himself which reunite them in threads that are particular to his existence.

Such is the importance of paying attention to *future as protention* that unites itself in a horizon, just like the patient of the clinic does when oscillating between present and past, urging the patient in future expectations. That is, protention which encompasses and goes through us in the mobilized lived experience of the here-and-now.

This leads to consequences worthy of interest: the present moment (suppose a human being in therapeutic or analytical process) can and should be *expanded in relationship to time* as a whole, in which this patient, sometimes in a movement of coming and going regarding his discourse (because that is what clinic is about and shows its most intimate essence: narratives produced by the human being about himself and for himself through the performativity of language) will conform subjectivity (May would say, his *self consciousness*) that this human being is: where the “I am” that continually comes (past) is mixed with the “I am being” (present), from his own projects of a becoming (future). In more direct terms: when the future influences, it resonates in the present.

Thus, although psychotherapy is given in the present moment of human being, *memory and existential possibilities* enter in the mixture of his conformation. It results by the way in the conclusion that one should attempt not make the mistake, during one’s clinical conduction, of excessively focusing in the here-and-now, as if this moment was more important in the therapeutic process. One does not even deal with “problems” (what is an allusion to Rogers); nor properly speaking with a “person” in itself. Much broader: in front of the therapist there is a *history* which, for various interurrences, is found to be more or less fragmented, bringing to the human being the feeling that was lost in the way, without knowing why or how. One needs to restore or create other meanings in order to keep alive (its becoming) with some meaning.

Still following May’s indications (and observing a framework which is, so to say, “normal” or “atypical”), the capacity of excessively temporalizing, as was previously said, which configures concrete and subjective existence as a history in the act, is such that the human being experiences it as a conjunction of “protentive” moments that, for him, are more or less discernible in the common division of time. However, if we are analyzing a mental disorder, whatever it is and without taking into account its specificities, it is characterized by the disorganization of that temporal conjunction: time subsists *unattached*, remaining *static* in some of those moments and there being fixed. In general, the human being in disorder seems to be sometimes “frozen” regarding the *future*, with an expectation which is empty of meaning, dissociating itself from the remaining temporal *continuum*. From these statements about time in subjectivity, how does May highlight it?

May’s Comprehension of Time

By exploring the semantics of the term *transcending*, May (1993) tells writes that this term “describes that which every human being is committed in doing every instant that he does not find himself seriously



sick or temporarily disturbed by despair or anxiety)²” (p.157). May is referring to the already mentioned human capacity of expanding himself beyond the present time in the direction of the future, creating expectations for himself. That said, if, for any other reason of someone’s history, this passage is found to be obstructed or blocked, one will feel cut from his existence, stagnating itself in fixed repetitions, running into circles which will bring nothing good to his life.

When commenting on veterans who suffered brain damage in the battlefields of the first world war and who were also under Kurt Goldstein’s care, May writes that the author perceived that those patients were “characterized by the loss of the realm of possibilities. Their space in world suffered a retraction, their time was ripped apart, and consequently they suffered for the radical loss of freedom” (May, 1993, p. 159). Going beyond humans with brain damage, who could probably be considered something rare regarding the patients attended by us in the psychological clinic, May’s reflections are still pertinent, for they indicate that, when the human being finds himself with compromise in this abstracting capacity in dealing with the possible (“Can I?”, “could I”, “Will I be able to?”), in the same measure remains compromised the exercise of freedom as being-able-to-choose facing the objective and daily circumstances and demands; in its existential contingencies.

Someone’s life history is a fabric whose stability and flexibility are fascinating: it does not consist in “destiny”, but actually in the *destination* of human being to face having to choose. *To need* to choose; to serve the sentence that one’s being-thrown-in-the-world was condemned: the very known penalty of freedom sentenced by Sartre which implies assuming in every choice the possibilities that are contained in the future in midst of this life which, sometimes seems to be strange, or familiar, or absurd. To assume the (un)certain future with bright lights and oppressive shadows it carries.

Whether in depressive disorders or anxiety cases³, the experience of time is found to be *disconnected* between its constitutive parts, and the meanings of the vital cycle are “lost”, making no sense. Memory, this psychological process which is the unavoidable support of our identity and history is severely compromised. In a rather simple image, it is like if the human being in suffering was “amnesic” of that which *was*, anesthetized of its *being*, and distressed about the dimensions of what *was to be*, now reduced to poor choices which are felt as non-attractive. In a word, *human being loses its historical meaning*, counting with little in order to give reasons for existing which, in other more healthy circumstances, would be to project one to the future. His “future of the past”, what would it be? He can no longer pose this simple question. About this, Canello (1991), in a interpretation coming from *Daseinanalysis*, writes that the “future of the past is the paid price for humans having a memory, for living in society and being able to compare their attitudes with the others, for participating (willingly or not!) in common projects, in short: for having a history” (p. 69).

Human Being, guided by its moral values, hates the inconstancy which he is. To “technicize” and to “manipulate” time with chores and a thousand goals of “enhancement”, which are also “stagnated” models of life is still an attempt of sugar-coating: to “tame” time in one’s own favour. And even to this, human being is also preventive: obscuring perspectives of existing which little by little create affections (actually, they bring them together) darkened to the point of nonconformity which becomes sickness (anxiety, collective forms of intolerance, depression, symbolic violence, virtual exhibitionism, abusive/toxic relationships, disinterest in the environment, increase of the suicide rate and etc), bitter and sickened fruits of modernity in which human does not want to assume dealing with the drama of existing, mixing together present and future and not being able to move from one to another. Even though Mosé (2018) writes with reason that “it was modernity that built the future, this new way of denying the present, of diminishing the instant and the life in the name of a better life, a happier life” (p. 66-67), as if human would only in another moment be fulfilled at the expense of his here-and-now, in the limit we perceive, however, that the future is found to be obstructed in the field of possible and present (which seems to detain more value for the human being), it is transformed into an arena of despair, because it is not less obscure, since we still have control over it. In short, life is exhausted.

Making reference to the psychotherapeutic process, May (1993) suggests that “if we can assist the patient in a state of anxiety or profound depression to anchor in a certain future moment, when the patient is *outside* this anxiety or depression [i.e., when he is not in crisis], we will have walked half the way” (p. 148). “Half the way” is a rather optimism by May. However, it is not unreal, since it consists in providing an receptive environment with a comprehensive listening in which the patient can face the elements of

² Instead of using the term “anxiety” (much common in the brazilian translations of Mays work) I have chosen the word “torment” for it seems to me that it answers better to May’s presented argument regarding this phenomenon, aligning himself in a proper way with this humanistic-existential thought. For the ones interested in this theme (torment), I would point some of May’s texts, namely: “Anxiety and Guilt as Ontological” (which is in the book “The Discovery of Being”); the chapter “Anxiety and Values” (which is to be found in his book *Psychology and the Human Dilemma* (1977); and the book which was his doctoral thesis, *The Meaning of Anxiety* (1980). For a brief explanation about the theme, cf. Ponte (2013).

³ *Depression* and *anxiety* are examples that May brings to illustrate his thesis. However, the same could be expanded for situations of great psychological disorganizations, such as *bipolarity*, for example, in which the human in disorder, when in its melancholic phase, finds himself locked in what already “happened”; and in his maniac phase is too heavily anchored in the present (Dias, Menezes & Ponte, 2018). For a more comprehensive understanding on the question of time in the bipolar disorder, I recommend the article of Moreira and Bloc (2012).



his present suffering, handling them in their actual meanings, imagining himself in a “maybe”, beyond this present, in which the constituted meanings for this equally painful exercise of facing suffering may provide an existence which goes forward without that which would hurt, or dealing through other forms/choices with that which still hurts, creating a web of significations which are meaningful.

May (1993) brings together those thoughts and even claims that “the existential therapists have observed that the most profound psychological experiences are, peculiarly, those which shake one’s relationship with time. Severe anxiety and depression erase time, annihilate the future” (p. 151). The guiding idea here is to retake future as a project, as prospective. This implies in an effort of reconnecting with the lived actuality and the previous history of the human being. In a word, human being must assume the becoming which he himself is. Something that has implications regarding the image itself which the human being usually make of himself.

However, this assumption towards future surely goes through a restauration of values which remake its present image of life provided by questions such as: “how would you like to live a life which is worth living?”. This is an imaginative inquire which reverberates, rebounces in the present as question which is hard to deflect. Such an inquire about the actuality of human being to be cut off and (re)positioned. Thus, it is fair to say that the present (and even the past), when held in check, is the work that comes out of a project, of an intimation, of a invitation which comes from the future.

It is clear for May that the “most profound psychological experiences” do not necessarily and always have to do with psychological disorders, but to those experiences which permeate subjectivity, since temporality is amazingly malleable and works for the human being’s affections, thoughts and imaginations. Artistic activity, for example, confirms this human power and its manifestations, above all the literary pieces (romances, novels and tales), in dealing with time for the simple fact of telling a story⁴. Still, human being, “if he has self-consciousness and is not disabled by anxiety or some other form of neurotic rigidity, finds himself permanently in a dynamic process of self-knowledge, ceaselessly investigating, molding himself and moving himself towards the future” (May, 1993, p. 153).

And since “every experience has a historical character” (May, 1993, p. 153), i.e., finds itself in a minimal condition of representation in the effective history, human being is not “outside” the process that he himself is. This transcending immediacy of living throwing oneself in protentions implicates the human being’s self consciousness: the presence of self for oneself in a given moment which affords a dislocating of perspectives that is the “mode of behaviour in which the person sees himself as subject and object” (p. 161), drawing possibilities only longed, at least for now; for to think the future is to think time (those are not stagnant instances which communicate among themselves), it emerges before us that this is a synonym of thinking life in its course and the plurality of possible paths.

Such “transcendence” is the fruit of the mode of being of human being’s language which calls him to create, abstract and tell his own history as something ongoing and to be able to recognize himself in this process which sustains a changing identity. May (1993) is emphatic when saying that the “human being’s capacity of transcending the immediate situation is discernible in the core of human experience and it cannot be worked around or forgotten without distorting or transforming frame which the person makes of himself into unreal and undefined” (p. 162). The author points out that it does not merely consists of self-consciousness, but actually of a meaningful and narrative expansion of oneself in which human being recognizes, assumes himself and is responsible for the narrative of himself as an ongoing “historical world”, perhaps searching for more world.

Final Words

If the human being is different from other animal species, this differential is in moving in time which he is and goes on making himself. May writes that this quality lies in the foundation of freedom. If we think in the therapeutic setting (which is, not rare, a relatively small place regarding space) as an ambience in which patients apprehend, little by little, their capacity of imagination by throwing themselves in enlargements of conjunctures, planes, projects, aspirations, desires, all of those turned towards future, *they can weave those images with the present, providing a new meaning to the past*, since “everything depends on the structure of our imagination in front of the possibilities of transcending - i.e., of exposing our objectives in front of us” (May, 1993, p. 164). By remaining with the possibility that I am free in my imagination in order

⁴ See as an example Tolstoy’s *The death of Ivan Ilitch*, in which the main character, living a disease which inflicts to him ferocious pains and will eventually cost his life, starts to remember all his existence and what made sense or not for him (and the personal or collective values included) which saw death very quickly approaching. Ivan, just as like any other human being, thought about the future, going from the present to the most distant past, strongly desiring that the future was another. The character twitched into despair into those conjectures, because the weight of death was for him inevitable (and Tolstoy is accurate in those descriptions!). Another literary example is the first page of the book *O Filho de Mil Homens*, from Valter Hugo Mãe. The main character, Crisóstomo, feels a profound sadness when realizing that he, with 40 years of age, had no sons; and for this reason, felt as if half of everything in the world and in himself was for him absent. Life, in its continuity, was for him incomplete and meaningless without the presence of an offspring (lively sign of a “future”). Finitude is a strong ingredient which can both paralyse existence or give to it a living and creative moment. Which perspectives regarding value are in stake in what concerns death is a valid question in those considerations about time.



to experiment myself today everything that *could* be/happen: by exercising a *future of the past* which I call *mine*, weaving other forms of subjectivation in those much more hyper connected and accelerated times of experiences which reach us more and harder. In those new subjective constitutions, Araújo (2002) claims that, in his own experience in clinical psychology, “the emergence of ultraspeed” (p. 82), has resulted in

(...) destabilizations in the subjectivities which periodically need to reinvent new ways of existence to interact with the various universes, in order to organize their sensations and experiences with some harmony, facing fear of shattering. The strength and intensity of the universe of the subjectivities’ sensations transform themselves throughout existence and produce new sensations, sometimes unpredictable, unspeakable, unable of being translated (Araújo, 2002, p. 82).

Naturally, human being only opens himself to time as experience which intimately concerns him, for he recognizes himself, even if unwillingly, as a being, not only in process, but also mortal. And this finitude encompasses all of the horizon of his possible senses, since none is given a priori. And if there is nothing which has been gifted to men in order to give way to man’s own existence, *he must do it for himself*. This is our apanage and opening to all our “could”, even if, eventually and occasionally, we are destined to die. And how Nietzsche (1978) cruelly and without detours reminds us,

(...) what is the “world” there for, what is “humanity” there for - that must for now not afflict us, unless we want to make a joke: for the insolence of the small human verm is what there is of more jocose and hilarious about the earthly stage: but what are you, individual, there for? - that I ask you and, if no one can say it, try it for once to legitimate the meaning of your existence as if *a posteriori*, proposing to yourself an end, a target, a “why”, a noble and high “for what” (p. 70).

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