

Holding Space for the Devil: Exploring Evil as Human Potentiality in Existential Therapy

In psychotherapy, moral judgments like “good” and “bad” are often avoided, yet such moral dichotomies often permeate clients’ inner worlds, self-perception, and relationships. This presentation deliberately engages with this lived polarity, posing the question: Can existential therapy, which seeks to embrace the totality of human experience, hold space for “badness”—not as something to be eradicated but as an existential given to be faced?

Badness, in this sense, refers to those aspects of the self that are deemed morally problematic, those parts we tend to actively reject, disown, or denounce on moral grounds. Closely related to notions like Jung’s shadow, May’s daemonic and Higgins’ dreaded self, badness is understood here as an ontological aspect of human experience, constantly reshaped by societal discourse, historical circumstance and moral norms. Ultimately, it represents a human potentiality reflecting the full range of possibilities inherent in Dasein’s being-in-the-world and inviting us to confront the moral dimensions of existence rather than deny them.

Badness is usually perceived as threatening to one’s sense of self-worth and ability to relate to the world. Consequently, it is typically rejected, becoming an inner Other that is repressed and marginalized or projected outward in destructive ways. This risks a fragmentation of the self on the personal level (as Rilke cautions: “If my devils are to leave me, I’m afraid my angels will take flight as well”) and perpetuate cycles of oppression and violence socially. What if, therefore, embracing badness rather than condemning it, holds the key to greater authenticity and interpersonal peace?

The challenge, then, is to create space for badness to surface and be acknowledged as such, addressing it with respect, humility and curiosity - without romanticizing or disguising it. Historically, this function was often served by religious practices such as the ritual of confession. However, in today’s secular world viable alternatives are scarce. In a culture that prioritizes positivity, productivity and self-improvement, safe spaces for exploring, examining and understanding “badness” without the pressure to reframe it positively or seek redemption are rare. Existential therapy can be such a space, allowing clients to encounter their shadows and work toward integration, accountability and authentic living.

This presentation will share literary and clinical case examples of such encounters, and discuss when and how existential therapy can create the space for individuals to process their own “badness” in meaningful ways. The presentation will also explore the broader implications for both personal growth

and societal peace that arise when space is held for the complexities of our inner lives - including the parts we most fear and despise.

Short CV

Vaggelis Lempesis is a psychologist and psychotherapist with a BA in Psychology and an MSc in Health Psychology from the University of Crete, as well as an MSc in Organizational Psychology from the University of East London. He has been trained in Cognitive Analytic and Existential Psychotherapy, with additional training in Client-Centered Psychotherapy, Gestalt in Organizations, and Relational Psychoanalysis.

He is a member of the Greek Psychological Association and has previously served as Secretary of the Athens Chapter of the International Association for Relational Psychoanalysis & Psychotherapy (IARPP). Based in private practice, he specializes in existential concerns, life transitions, grief, loss, and struggles in romantic relationships. His therapeutic approach is rooted in existential psychotherapy, emphasizing presence and experience over explanation and interpretation, while also drawing on systemic perspectives. He also serves as an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) counselor, providing support for workplace-related psychological concerns.

Beyond his clinical work, he has worked as a playwright and scriptwriter, often exploring psychological themes through storytelling.