

Holding Space for the Devil

Exploring evil as human potentiality in existential therapy

Fare spazio al Diavolo

Esplorare il male come potenzialità umana nella terapia esistenziale

Abstract (English)

This presentation offers an existential-psychotherapeutic reflection on evil, understood not as a metaphysical force but as a fundamental human possibility: the capacity to deliberately cause unjustifiable harm.

Drawing on a personal phenomenological vignette, existential philosophy, and literary imagery, evil is explored as something typically perceived as “elsewhere,” foreign, or unthinkable. This displacement renders human destructiveness difficult to recognize and assume responsibility for, both individually and relationally.

From a clinical perspective, the presentation examines how the denial or exile of evil manifests in psychotherapy, affecting agency, responsibility, and ethical stance. Finally, it argues that existential therapy can provide a space in which this denied potential may be safely acknowledged, without normalization or excuse, allowing clients and therapists alike to assume a more authentic, responsible, and humane relation to evil.

Abstract (Italiano)

Questa presentazione offre una riflessione esistenziale-psicoterapeutica sul male, inteso non come una forza metafisica ma come una possibilità fondamentale dell'essere umano: la capacità di causare deliberatamente un danno ingiustificabile.

Muovendo da una vignetta fenomenologica personale, dalla filosofia esistenziale e da immagini letterarie, il male viene esplorato come qualcosa che è tipicamente percepito come “altrove”, estraneo o impensabile. Questo processo di dislocazione rende la distruttività umana difficile da riconoscere e da assumere come responsabilità, sia a livello individuale sia relazionale.

Da una prospettiva clinica, la presentazione esamina come la negazione o l'esilio del male si manifestino nel lavoro psicoterapeutico, incidendo sull'agency, sulla responsabilità e sulla postura etica del soggetto. Infine, si sostiene che la psicoterapia esistenziale possa offrire uno spazio in cui questo potenziale negato possa essere riconosciuto in modo sicuro, senza normalizzazione né giustificazione, permettendo a pazienti e terapeuti di assumere una relazione più autentica, responsabile e umana con il male.

Main text

“Evil” is a word that doesn’t sit comfortably on the lips of psychotherapists. It carries immense ethical and metaphysical weight—tending toward the spiritual or moral.

And yet, I believe it’s crucial that we address it today, in all its disorienting ambiguity. If for no other reason, then because the problem of evil is increasingly present in the concerns of our clients—clients who are living in a world that seems, once again, to be descending into animosity, persecution, and violent conflict.

Even as the notion of evil disturbs and appalls us, I believe it’s worth standing upright before it—and keeping its name intact. So let me, lightly and humbly, tread in its shadow as I try to explore the question: *How can we, as existential therapists, help our clients navigate a world where evil resides?*

There was a moment when I had deeply personal encounter with what I can only call “evil.”

Several years ago, I was part of a small amateur theatre group. One day, we were trying to improvise a scene of aggression. But it wasn’t working—we were too restrained, too civilized. So, we agreed on an experiment: we would turn off the lights, play loud music, and under the cover of darkness, give ourselves permission to interact without restrictions. Nothing would be off limits.

So, lights off. Primal beats blaring from the speakers. And off we went.

We didn’t last long. Just a few minutes later, we were all exclaiming the safe word, scrambling to turn the lights back on. Nothing explicitly dramatic had happened. We had barely touched one another, hardly moved. But there were sounds: panting, roaring, growling, barking. And the feeling that something had stirred—something dark and old that made us flee to the light. Not merely an emotion or a mood, but a possibility.

As we later shared, in the darkness of that rehearsal studio we had all experienced the very real potential—the urge, even—to harm one another.

This experience haunts me still. Was it really possible that we—loving friends, well-meaning, sober, mentally stable—were capable of savagery? That I, too, could have hurt my friends? *Wanted to? How?*

I don’t have a definite answer, but what I accept this: Evil is, primarily, *possible*.

The capacity for cruelty is, I believe, part of the human condition – a view echoed by thinkers like Martin Heidegger, Rollo May and Carl Jung and explored in depth by Dr. Diamond.

It is also a consequence of our existential freedom. Nikolai Berdyaev argues that, because “freedom precedes creation,” the heart of existence is groundless—and in this groundlessness, all must be included. Or Schelling put it: *“the real and vital conception of freedom is that it is the possibility of good and evil.”*

I would concur, therefore, that evil carries ontological weight. It is not merely the absence of good, as theologians like Augustine and Aquinas once argued. Rather, as Schelling suggested, evil is a *positive* phenomenon.

It exists - not as a metaphysical force, but as a potentiality.

Why, then, were my fellow actors and I so astounded?

Allow me to turn to literature.

Paradise Lost by John Milton is a monumental work recounting the biblical myth of expulsion from Eden. Its central character is Lucifer—an archetype so deeply etched into our collective imagination that he practically embodies the very idea of evil.

What strikes me most about Milton's Lucifer, is *how* he is introduced. We don't meet Lucifer in his pride or defiance—but in *defeat*. Cast out, fallen from Heaven into the fiery pit:

“Nine times the space that measures day and night
to mortal men, he with his horrid crew
Lay vanquished, rolling in the fiery gulf,
Confounded, though immortal.”
(*Book I, 50–53*)

This, I believe, is profoundly meaningful. We always meet Lucifer *already fallen*. His exile is woven into his very being—it is his existential state.

The idea of evil's displacement recurs across myth and culture: the monster, ghost, demon living apart—in haunted moors, dark forests, deep valleys.

It is Grendel in *Beowulf*, tortured by human joy. Kurtz, gone mad in the jungle's heart of darkness. The portrait of Dorian Gray, locked away from sight. Dracula, isolated in his castle.

Evil is imagined as estranged, remote—in other words, it *presents* itself in a state of *otherness*.

This otherness suggests that, while we can account for the cruelty of others, our own capacity for evil often eludes us. We spot the darkness in others like distant peaks, but standing on the mountain ourselves, we rarely see the shape of our own.

Inability to witness can lead to a total failure to recognize or define our destructive impulses. Milton describes Lucifer's followers as having lost more than their place in paradise:

“And powers that erst in Heaven sat on thrones,
though on their names in heavenly records now
be no memorial, blotted out and razed
by their rebellion from the books of life.”
(*Book I, 360–363*)

Our darkest potentials can be not only persistently denied but even utterly *unthinkable*. As Dutch psychiatrist Gerrit Glas writes “*Something exists in the nature of evil itself that resists being spoken about and thought about.*”

What I find essential to remember is that our capacity for evil presents itself through its very improbability.

And this is how it most often appears in therapy. Not as overt malice, but as the phenomenological consequences of its exile: the vital lie that “I cannot be capable of wickedness” and the many forms it may take.

This disavowal may protect self-image but exacts a cost. Carl Jung and Rollo May demonstrate this through the Shadow and the Daimonic.

I see this cost clearly in clients’ suffering framed as “exiled evil.”

By “evil” here, I mean *the capacity to intentionally bring about unjustifiable harm*. This incomplete and personal definition highlights that to deny this capacity is to deny one or more of its core elements: *ability, intent, impact and malice*.

- **I cannot cause harm** — this is not an ethical declaration, but a claim of powerlessness. It is not the imperative to choose good, but the conviction that one simply couldn't do otherwise, due to impotence or moral paralysis. This perceived inability mirrors and magnifies feelings of feebleness, helplessness or despair. When the possibility of evil briefly enters awareness, it brings the frightening realization of one’s actual strength. Think, for example, a timid programmer, constantly dismissed by peers and managers, shocked by his bursts of road rage. Or a soft-spoken, conservative mother who struggles to accept that she resents her rebellious teenager. These moments threaten the image of harmlessness that sustains their sense of self.
- **If I can cause harm, it is not intentional** — Sometimes we do not deny our capacity to do harm, but rather our willingness. We refuse to acknowledge certain unacceptable motivations, which leads us to distort our own intentionality. In its exile, evil carries with it part of our inner experience, leaving us estranged from some of our needs, desires and aspirations. Sometimes an external force is made to carry these disowned parts. For example, a young, anxious, and overly intellectual physicist who frequently loses control under the influence of alcohol and ends up in fist fights. Beer, for him, becomes an agent of holding and, at the same time, disowning his aggression.
- **What I can cause deliberately is not harm** — This is a failure to acknowledge the suffering one causes. When we lose sight of suffering, we lose sight of a significant part of our relational world. Emmanuel Levinas posited that “suffering reveals the Other as Other” – and in doing so brings us closer to authentic relating. To turn away from our capacity to harm the other, is to turn away from our responsibility toward them. But more importantly, from a deeper, more present and meaningful connection with them. Think of a young couple recently confronted with infidelity: the sudden realization of their capacity to hurt one another that invites not only grief or guilt, but the possibility of a more honest, intimate way of relating.
- **If I cause harm deliberately, it is justifiable** — In this form of denial, we disown not the act or the intent, but the malice behind it. This, I believe, is among the most dangerous exiles of evil. It cloaks cruelty in moral righteousness, burdening our relationships with accusations of deservedness. At its extreme, it paves the way for hatred, bigotry, and the most violent expressions of human aggression. From the abusive partner who insists the victim “had it coming,” to ideologues who justify persecution, our refusal to face our own hatred may be precisely what enables it.

Existential therapy, to me, is one of the few spaces where the Devil can safely reclaim his place in consciousness. This is a delicate, even dangerous undertaking that must never be forced. Our role is not to provoke confrontation, but to make space for it when the time is right, and, like Dante's Virgil, walk our clients through their private Infernos. This demands absolute safety, radical acceptance and a strong therapeutic alliance.

But I think it is an effort worth pursuing.

To draw evil back from exile into the light is not only ethically responsible and psychologically healing, but also existentially vital. It means reclaiming authenticity and assuming full responsibility for our freedom.

To see our own evil as a valid potential is to return it to the scope of human experience—so that when we encounter it, it may still shock or appall us, but it need not paralyze us.

Outrage, despair, moral panic—these, I think, suggest some kind of moral astonishment at its very existence. When we accept that evil exists—*as within, so without*—we become capable of assuming a more realistic stance toward it. Not excuse it. Not normalize or allow it. But endure it, carry its weight, resist it.

And maybe even forgive it. Because to truly forgive is not to stand on higher ground, but to meet the perpetrator in the terrifying lowlands of our shared human capacity for evil.

These thoughts, of course, only scratch the surface of a vast terrain. I can only hope they've caused a small disturbance—a slight twirl in the mystic dance of inner demons. Like the ones that roared in my ears for several minutes during a nightly rehearsal, years ago.

Looking back on that strange experience, I find myself wishing only this:

That I had stayed with the darkness a little longer.

Long enough to hear its voice beckoning.

Long enough to whisper back:

Not today.