

Encountering Evil in Existential Depth Psychology



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This presentation provides a brief description of what I call “existential depth psychology” (Diamond, 1996, 2024) and how it can be helpful clinically in comprehending and dealing with the devastating phenomena of both human and natural evil. The ubiquitous problem of evil has always been an ultimate concern for religion, theology, and philosophy; but, until recently, was deliberately circumvented by contemporary psychiatry and psychology. Evil, however, is far more than a theological or philosophical concern: it is an archetypal or universal inescapable existential fact of life. Vienna’s very own Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) grappled, albeit obliquely, with the psychology of evil in his controversial theories of the unconscious, id, and Thanatos (the death instinct). It was also here in this cradle of modern depth psychology that a young American named Rollo May (1909-1994) attended talks by Alfred Adler (1870-1937), whose prescient focus on power and aggression (see Diamond, 1996; Abzug, 2021)—combined with the seminal writings of Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung (1875-1961) on the shadow (1961, 1968) and those of Viennese psychoanalyst Otto Rank (1884-1939) regarding the central role of “will” in human evil—eventually inspired May to become a psychologist and psychoanalyst and to more existentially and deeply explore the reality of evil, culminating in his revolutionary conception of the daimonic (see May, 1969; Diamond, 1996, 2021, 2024). We avoid consciously acknowledging and confronting the terrifying facticity of evil and its catastrophic consequences at our own peril. For, as famed Viennese existential analyst Viktor Frankl (1905-1997) so pithily put it, “Since Auschwitz, we know what man is capable of. And since Hiroshima, we know what is at stake.” (1946/1984, p. 179).

Biography:

Dr. Stephen Diamond is a licensed clinical and forensic psychologist practicing in Los Angeles. His approach to psychotherapy developed over the past five decades—existential depth psychology—is a uniquely creative synthesis of Freudian, Jungian, and existential analysis. Dr. Diamond teaches and lectures internationally, blogs for Psychology Today, has published numerous journal articles and book chapters—including for the forthcoming APA Handbook of Humanistic and Existential Therapy (2024)—and is the distinguished author of *Anger, Madness, and the Daimonic: The Psychological Genesis of Violence, Evil, and Creativity* (1996, SUNY Press), with a Foreword from former mentor Rollo May.