



An Appeal for Thoughtfulness

By Norman Stockwell

The Evil of Banality: On the Life and Death Importance of Thinking
by Elizabeth Minnich

Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

256 pages. \$85.00 hardcover, \$29.95 paperback.

“It flips it, and it gets people thinking again,” Elizabeth Minnich tells me, as we sit on a friend’s couch on New York City’s Upper West Side in February. “It was driving me crazy that across the media, people would talk about the ‘banality of evil,’ and for that to become a banality itself was really unbearable.”

Minnich is explaining the title of her most recent book, *The Evil of Banality*—a conscious flipping of the subtitle of Hannah Arendt’s famous book on the trial of Nazi leader Adolf Eichmann. Minnich, a lifelong civil rights and justice activist who now lives in North Carolina, had been a teaching assistant for Arendt at the New School in New York City while the renowned scholar was defending her book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, published in 1963.

“I took a course with her called ‘Political Experiences of the Twentieth Century,’ which is about Europe between the wars, and then the rise of the Nazis and the development of totalitarianism. And, after the first course,

she asked me to be her teaching assistant. I said, ‘But I’ve only had one philosophy course,’ and she said, ‘Ach, ach,



doesn’t matter!’ She really was not conventional. So I sat in on her large lecture

courses and was in her small seminar courses,” Minnich, now a professor of moral philosophy at Queens University of Charlotte and senior fellow for the Association of American Colleges and Universities, recalls a half century later.

“And it was after she had written the book about the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, and she was still being asked to speak about it publicly. She hadn’t yet given up trying to explain herself, because it got so ugly and she took me with her to a lot of those conversations.”

The book *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was intensely controversial when it appeared, first as a series of articles in *The New Yorker*. Arendt described Eichmann not as an evil demon, but as a banal, ordinary person.

“It was precisely this lack of imagination,” she wrote, “which enabled him to sit for months on end [leading him to the trial] facing a German Jew who was conducting the police interrogation, pouring out his heart to the man and explaining again and again how it was that he reached only the rank of lieutenant colonel in the S.S. and that it had been his fault that he was not promoted.” Arendt argued that Eichmann “was not stupid. It was sheer thoughtlessness . . . that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period.”

Arendt, whose classic 1951 study *The Origins of Totalitarianism* had been the main reason *The New Yorker* chose her to cover Eichmann’s trial, goes on to note: “The essence of totalitarian government, and perhaps the nature of every bureaucracy, is to make functionaries and mere cogs in the administrative machinery out of men, and thus to dehumanize them.”

According to recent reports, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* has seen a sixteen-fold increase in sales since the election of Donald Trump, as many people seek to better understand his rise to power and prominence. In the three-part, more-than-500-page study, Arendt looks at the history that gave rise to Nazism, but also the more generic features of totalitarian rule.

“Totalitarian movements are mass organizations of atomized, isolated individuals,” she wrote. “Total loyalty is possible only when fidelity is emptied of all concrete content, from which changes of mind might naturally arise.”

Arendt’s treatise is the starting point for Minnich’s new work, aptly subtitled “On the Life and Death Importance of Thinking.” The book, which had its publication date moved up following Trump’s election, is the result of a life-

time of weighing the question of evil.

“I needed to understand how it was that ordinary people could do horrific things,” she told me. “It’s from the very small seed of just being inconsiderate. Thoughtless. That was fascinating to me. When you take the full range of meanings of thoughtless. When some-

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body says ‘Don’t be thoughtless,’ they mean ‘You’re not taking other people into consideration.’ All the way out to Arendt’s use of it for Eichmann, that he was capable of doing these things because he was so radically thoughtless.”

Minnich’s book is an exhaustive study of types of evil, and thoughtlessness. She makes a distinction between “intensive evil,” which is conducted over a short time, by a small number of perpetrators, and “extensive evil,” which takes place over a long time and involves a large number of willing participants.

“Five people can’t commit genocide,” Minnich tells me. “You have to have a lot of people.”

Some evils, she notes, are both intensive and extensive.

“In some ways,” she adds, “the intensive evil is like the spark. But it can’t take unless people continue being kind of thoughtless and let normal morality be redefined in these terms because they/we are so used to certain conventions and used to being clichéd and are not accustomed to saying, ‘Wait, that’s different and I can’t do that.’”

It is this clichéd way of thinking, this thoughtlessness, that allows people to

become cogs in the machine of extensive evil.

This is what Minnich describes as the “evil of banality” in the book, the simple fact that to perpetrate these extensive evils, many “ordinary people must get up, day after day after day; have breakfast; go out in the daylight among others; and once again directly themselves do and/or participate knowledgeably in enabling others to do horrific things on purpose.”

This sort of action by what she calls “reliable workers” was noted recently in the press coverage of immigration officials enforcing Trump’s hastily enacted executive order banning the entry of immigrants from seven majority Muslim countries.

Various workers began the day like any other, wrote Chris Edelson, an assistant professor of government in American University’s School of Public Affairs, in a *Baltimore Sun* article, yet ended up doing extraordinary things. At Dulles International Airport in Virginia, a five-year-old boy was handcuffed and detained for several hours. A five-year-old child. At the same airport, a Somali woman traveling with her two children, both U.S. citizens, was detained for twenty hours without food, allegedly handcuffed, and threatened with deportation. At Kennedy Airport, a sixty-five-year-old woman traveling from Qatar to visit her son, a sergeant stationed at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, was held for more than thirty-three hours and denied the use of a wheelchair.

“The men and women who work for the federal government completed these and other tasks and then returned to their families, where perhaps they had dinner and read stories to their children before bedtime,” Edelson wrote. “These are, in normal circumstances, people who likely treat their

neighbors and co-workers with kindness and do not intentionally seek to harm others. That is chilling, as it is a reminder that authoritarians have no trouble finding the people they need to carry out their acts of cruelty. They do not need special monsters; they can issue orders to otherwise unexceptional people who will carry them out dutifully.”

How can this happen so quickly? Minnich takes the reader through many examples of extensive evils in our history. In the book, she refers to what she calls “seeding prepared ground”—a phenomenon she finds “remarkably similar across instances of extensive evils.” It also sounds remarkably familiar in the wake of the recent electoral campaign:

“It is a time in which things are harder than usual for many of us, when we are off-balance, anxious, angry, a new group appears, seeking power,” Minnich writes. “Those who speak of and for it appeal to us by using a language that we recognize, connect with, and are animated by. They are vivid, forceful, emotional, and promise to better our lot in life, to make us less economically and socially insecure, less vulnerable. This new order, if we go with it, will open doors for us to money, power, status. We listen. Our minds begin to change . . . After all, we are not risk-takers, and we have careers to forward.”

So how can societies create individuals able to resist the evil of banality? It’s important, Minnich argues, to give people the tools to think, not just “train” them to perform. For many of today’s political leaders, she explains, “education is for job preparation, so that you can make more money. That’s the measure. Well, that tells you what they wanted education for. They want you to be a player in the economy and

to help the economy keep growing.”

Ultimately the book is a passionate call for “thoughtfulness”—for creating a culture of thinking, an education against banality.

“How do we teach thinking so that those who are educated—as many of

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us as humanly possible—are simply disinclined to take seriously, let alone give their minds, their consciences, their work, their power to anyone or anything that requires them not to think?” Minnich asks. It is not an easy task. It is, she concludes, really a process. “I am afraid that always, yes, we need to continue to think, to rethink, to watch ourselves thinking, and to do it afresh tomorrow before, during, and after we act.”

In her next book, Minnich hopes to write more about “an education that can free us not only from the weight of ignorance, but from the deadening, deadly hold of banality.” But, for now, she writes, “I am keenly aware of a realistic sense of urgency, that the time to be startled back into thought and action, alone and crucially also with others, is always now. The consequences of our not-thinking are great.”

We concluded our conversation talking about Donald Trump. “He is a walking, talking, tweeting cliché,”

Minnich tells me. “He’s never not posturing. If he picks up a phrase and people like it, he uses it. Whether he means it or not. He gives people clichés that are prejudicial. Epithets that people just use without thinking.”

And that, frankly, leaves her frightened: “I am convinced that is deadly dangerous, because, and this is one of the lines that keeps going through the book, ‘people who aren’t thinking are capable of anything.’” ♦

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