

February 2017

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

Kathleen Barry

Professor Emerita, Pennsylvania State University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/dignity>

 Part of the [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Feminist Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Barry, Kathleen (2017) "The Evil of Banality: On the Life and Death Importance of Thinking by Elizabeth Minnich," *Dignity: A Journal on Sexual Exploitation and Violence*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 6.

DOI: 10.23860/dignity.2017.02.01.06

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/dignity/vol2/iss1/6><http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/dignity/vol2/iss1/6>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@URI. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dignity: A Journal on Sexual Exploitation and Violence by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@URI. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@etal.uri.edu.

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

Keywords

Evil, banality, human behavior, consciousness, thinking, violence, prostitution, feminism

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

**BOOK REVIEW: THE EVIL OF BANALITY: ON THE LIFE AND
DEATH IMPORTANCE OF THINKING BY ELIZABETH MINNICH**

Kathleen Barry

Professor Emerita, Pennsylvania State University

KEYWORDS

Evil, banality, human behavior, consciousness, thinking, violence, prostitution, feminism

GOOD OR EVIL!" that terminology almost went out of use two or three decades ago, but not for philosopher Elizabeth Minnich whose latest book, *The Evil of Banality* has been a life's work. After World War II, her mentor, Hannah Arendt, introduced us to *the banality of evil* in her coverage of trials of Nazis.

Minnich's work asks us to rethink the concepts of evil and banality. She expands the concept of evil to "extensive evil," and brings us to consciousness of commonplace evil throughout our societies and in ordinary daily life. Collusion with evil may be found in the taken-for-grantedness of social practices over decades, sometimes centuries, a kind of evil that remains unquestioned. Minnich unravels and reveals "extensive evil" with both eloquence and kind-heartedness that makes the reader want to dig deeper to find it and to undo it.

Profound in its impact and intelligent in its thoughtfully honed premises, as truths usually are when they transcend ideology, *The Evil of Banality* has reached the bookshelves just as we find our world tottering on a precipice between good and evil. The new and refreshed philosophical truths imparted in this book engage our consciousness, collectively and individually. The author calls us to act from our intelligence and with reflection for that is how to move ourselves and our society away from the catastrophic evil of dangerous and hateful leaders. Considering neither herself nor any of us free of the evil of banality, Minnich points the way for us and our societies to bring it into the light of day where we can confront it. I have no doubt that Minnich's feminism is at work in the sensitivity and vision she brings to this searching book.

As I read Minnich's analysis, I thought of the violent behavior and humiliating acts of men when they buy women for prostitution, and in contrast, how often I am met with sincere and well-meaning concern for the women in prostitution. These people are so well-meaning that they call prostitution "sex work" because they want women to feel better about being bought by men for sexual use. These are often good people who do not realize that they are implicitly supporting the sex industries.

There is another way to support women who are in prostitution; one country after another is criminalizing men for buying women to use for sex while decriminalizing women and providing them support programs to reset their lives and recover from harm. But those people who mean to support “sex workers” ask, “Who are we to interfere with women’s choices?” For years I have been stumped by these same women wondering why they defend violence and humiliation in prostitution as “sex work,” but would not say of a married woman who is being systematically abused by her husband, staying in her marriage because she loves him, and is sure that he won’t do it again, “it’s her choice, who are we to interfere?” We intervene because we see harm coming to women, because they are sex objects to those who buy them for a few minutes or a few hours. We establish refuge programs around the country for women to find safety and begin to get control of their lives, their health, and well-being.

In reading *The Evil of Banality*, I realized that many of those people who fall into implicit support of the sex trade are good people who have fallen into unthinking and non-reflective behaviors. But as Minnich would say, I believe, it is not that easy. For their non-reflective responses uphold two separate categories of women: “wives,” who must be helped and supported and “whores,” who are different from the rest of us women, the very constructs of patriarchal power.

While some who read this may find that what I have said goes against all you know about prostitution or sex work, if you call it that. But that is precisely the intention of Elizabeth Minnich’s work as I see it. If you can live with that discomfort for a moment, you may recognize the importance of uncovering the evil of banality which you may not have known you accepted without questioning it.

The Evil of Banality, by far the most important and urgent book I have read in at least thirty years, is free of jargon, slogans, and guilt that so often comes with treatises on major moral issues. I highly recommend that *The Evil of Banality* be taught in women’s studies, race relations, political science, sociology, psychology and, of course, philosophy courses. Not only students, but everyone will discover that this book brings to us questions that many of us do not even know we should be asking.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Kathleen Barry, Ph.D., Professor Emerita, Pennsylvania State University, is a sociologist and radical feminist activist in global human rights against sexual exploitation. From her books, *Female Sexual Slavery* (1979, 1983) and *The Prostitution of Sexuality: The Global Exploitation of Women* (1995), she is building a global movement to introduce a new law, the Convention Against Sexual Exploitation, to the United Nations. She continues in her writing and activism to expose the masculinity of war, a work she began with her 2011 book, *Unmaking War, Remaking Men*. See www.kathleenbarry.net.

RECOMMENDED CITATION

Barry, Kathleen. (2017). Book review: The evil of banality: On the life and death importance of thinking by Elizabeth Minnich. *Dignity: A Journal of Sexual Exploitation and Violence*. Vol. 2, Issue 1, Article 6. doi:10.23860/dignity.2017.02.01.06. Available at <http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/dignity/vol2/iss1/6>.