Over several weeks I corresponded with Elizabeth Minnich and talked by telephone with her at her home in Charlotte, North Carolina, where she is a professor of moral philosophy at Queens University. She is also Senior Scholar for the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ Office of Diversity, Equity, and Global Initiatives. An award-winning author, she has written two other books prior to The Evil of Banality: On The Life and Death Importance of Thinking (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017). Professor Minnich was a friend of the late Strachan Donnell- ley, the founder and first president of The Center for Humans and Nature, and she served on the Center’s Board of Directors for many years.

James Ballowe (JB): Your book’s title is The Evil of Banality: On the Life and Death Importance of Thinking. Many readers will know that your title echoes the subtitle of Hannah Arendt’s book Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil, published in its final form in 1964. You were Arendt’s teaching assistant, and she was your mentor. How does the emphasis in your phrase “the evil of banality” differ in meaning from Arendt’s subtitle?

Elizabeth Minnich (EM): Arendt was telling us something she observed about the Nazis, and more specifically still about Adolf Eichmann, “The Engineer of the Final Solution.” She was not then announcing a theory but, as she said, a fact: Eichmann was a startlingly banal person despite his undeniably monstrous deeds. May I observe here that this phenomenon—a thoughtless person who evidently thinks and speaks in clichés, however inappropriate, while being capable of enormous harm—ought to be less alien to our experience in the United States today than perhaps it was when Arendt was writing?

When Arendt took me with her to public discussions of her book, which were often acrimonious and painful, what struck me was, first, that “the banality of evil” was deeply troubling to people, as it seemed to trivialize enormous wrongdoing and suffering. It occurred to me that, had Arendt spoken of “the evil of banality,” what she meant might have made more sense. The thought has stayed with me that we need to comprehend how banality—superficiality in its differing modes—works to enable its apparent opposite, the great drama of horrific harm-doing.

With that question in mind, I went looking for how perpetrators and enablers—not only under the Nazis, but in differing eras and times—actually thought about what they were doing. Were they, after all, driven by monstrous hatreds, prejudices, furies somewhat equal to the horror of their deeds? Or were they really banal, thinking in clichés, conventions, time-worn and faddish commonplaces? Or something else entirely?

May I give some background here?

JB: Yes. Please do.

EM: Hannah Arendt had actually been thinking for decades about the need not to glorify evil—in this case, that of the Nazis—so she was primed to find herself with the concept, as she put it, the banality of evil, when faced with Adolf Eichmann. She and her teacher and then life-long friend, the philosopher Karl Jaspers, corresponded during and after World War II, after Arendt had fled to the United States. They had early agreed that Arendt’s use of “radical evil” for the Nazis was wrong, because they were petty people, unworthy of such inflation.

Faced with Eichmann and the transcripts from pre-trial interviews with him, Arendt finally fully re-
alized just how apt the refusal to romanticize the perpetrators of genocide as Monsters, Devils, really was. What struck her, she said, was that the only thing about Eichmann that was extraordinary was his “thoughtlessness,” his inability to think other than in clichés and “edifying phrases,” as she put it.

She did not mean that “We are all capable of being Eichmann”; she even vehemently denied that. He was “extreme” in his thoughtlessness.

But this leaves us with a question that haunted me: What do we need to learn from observing that there are horrific individuals, such as Hitler and Himmler and Heydrich, but also many, many more ordinarily decent individuals who carry out their orders, not infrequently even without supervision, going “above and beyond” to earn promotions and other bribes, and thereby enable the reign of evil—individuals whose deeds are monstrous even as they are themselves no worse than ambitious job-holders in other times? That is, aside from a few twisted souls, what do we need to learn about the many, many others who make possible the perversion of a whole country into a machine of murder, or the many countries contributing to the destruction of a planet? A few moral monsters cannot carry out a genocide, slavery, vast economic exploitation, the combining causes of climate change, all by themselves. This is relevant to us today, too, I think. Imagine what seems unthinkable (although such things are evidently not historically unprecedented): Imagine people in their numbers simply refusing to take jobs at environmentally destructive companies, or to buy their products, or to own their shares. If that were to happen, the few, the ones we want to blame as if they did it all by themselves, couldn’t continue.

So, I set out to understand what it is that makes such monstrous, utterly non-banal, evils possible. That took me back into a study of the Nazi genocide, and on from there to genocide in Rwanda, slavery and human trafficking, egregious treatment of workers around the globe, endemic sexual violence against females, and more. It also evidently takes us to the issues of human destruction of nature, on which life depends.

JB: Much of your book is dedicated to defining the differences between two types of evil and good: extensive and intensive. Could you define for us what you mean by extensive and intensive evil and good and why it is necessary to distinguish between them?

EM: As I studied examples of horrific harm-doing, I searched for what the perpetrators, the enablers, were thinking. Were they thinking at all? I slowly realized that a key reason I kept losing a grip on what I was finding was because there were two major kinds of evils. (No doubt, there are two parallel types of good, as well.) Of course, there are always many gradations; nothing is that neat. But there is a startlingly clear distinction between, on one hand, horrific harms that shatter illusions of normality, shock almost everyone, are short-term, and involve few perpetrators, and horrific harms, evils, that take time and require mass participation, on the other. The former I call intensive evils. They include, for example, the murders of the Manson cult, and the suicide/murders of Jonestown, or the kidnapping/murders/cannibalism of Jeffrey Dahmer, or—if it were an isolated and rare event – the poisoning of a town’s water supply with toxic waste by one company. Intensive evils are and remain shocking in their own times.

Extensive evils involve perversions of whole systems; they are normalized; they persist over time; and most of all, they require vast numbers of people to do their difficult work through that time—day after day after day. Intensive evils can be done in a fit of rage, or craziness, or hatred, or greed; extensive evils cannot. Consider again leading examples of extensive evils, like genocides, economies based on slavery, global child pornography production; corporate exploitation of the most vulnerable workers, of eco-systems, all that leads to climate change—these require many
ordinary, “reliable” people doing their jobs daily, not the “possessed” zealots who are behind most intensive evils.

Hence, extensive evils are entirely different from intensive evils. And the distinction is important because we tend to revert to explanations for intensive evils when we need to understand extensive ones, and that will not work. It is intensive evil for a pyromaniac to launch a forest fire, or for a criminal cast out of a village to sneak back and poison its wells. It is extensive evil when the pillars of society and a whole economic order accepts as mainstream that pollution of whatever sort and consequence is understood to be a mere bother that must not derail profits, economic growth, freedom from governmental interference. When careerism, greed, status-seeking are rewarded for work that is horrifically harmful to large numbers of people, even to a viable future for all, we have a classic case of extensive evil. It is not perpetrated by monsters; it is perpetrated by those who think no further than how to play and try to win in the present game, by the dominant rules.

JB: Your book concentrates on the disastrous effect that banality can have upon human communities. As a former board member of The Center for Humans and Nature you know well that not thinking about how to preserve a healthy environment for ourselves and other creatures also does extensive harm to us, now and into the future. Not thinking, you say at one point, leads us to do “terrible things to those people, to those animals, that forest—whatever we ‘simply’ do not think about.” And later, you write that to accomplish “unthinkable acts’…you want people who are able and consistently willing to close what they do day after day out of the reflective consciousness almost all of us do have, the thoughtful consciousness from which consciences arise…[For extensive evils] you want, that is, to keep minds turned off on the meta-level: no questions about, no looking back at and wondering, no reaching for connections to beliefs, to other meanings. [You do not want your workers asking], ‘What is the relation of what we are actually doing to people, to the earth?’”

So, indeed, you do say that the extensive evil enabled by banality extends to the environment we share with other beings. Could you elaborate on that by commenting on the current attitude that many in power today have toward preserving the natural spaces that sustain life?

EM: Yes, we touched on that just now, although again, those in power depend on us to do the work. I would call it intensive evil when someone, or one company, buys a quite small tract of land on which generations of people have lived sustainably, drives those living there now off with no way of re-creating their lives or preparing for new ones, and destroys the land and the air and the water in order to profit from a factory, a mine, a development that employs people desperate enough to accept sub-par wages.

I would call it extensive evil when such scenarios are not exceptional, but commonplace; when they are defended as normal and even necessary to a greater good. Extensive evil feeds on thinking and belief that justifies harm-doing that profits a few without regard for severe, even irreversible, harm done to the many, now and/or in the future. This condition fits exactly a prime, if not the only, instance of extensive evil of our times. It is considered acceptable, even good, to pursue profit and, more abstractly, but perhaps even more questionably, to pursue “economic growth,” as ends in themselves, all-justifying principles, regardless of harms done. Across eras and cultures, with startling consistency I found that the common petty vices, which such “economism” validates, are present in extensive evils. I am still grappling with this. Low-level greed or status seeking—how can they alone be enough to lead people to do monstrous things? But they demonstrably are. The banal deadens, and
can make us deadly. If they can keep their jobs, get a raise, a promotion, a bonus, a bit of status, the many enablers required for extensive evils will fail to object to serious wrongs done by those in power. Genocides and ecocides are not perpetrated by frightened, mindlessly obedient people until an all-pervasive totalitarian system is deeply entrenched (North Korea comes to mind). Before that, and usually, they are done by reliable workers doing their jobs well by focusing on playing the prevailing game successfully. They are using their minds; they, we, are not thinking, reflecting. And so the much greater greed and struggles for still more among the few have force far beyond them. The intensive becomes extensive.

JB: You close The Evil of Banality with this promise: “In my next book, the one that has kept trying to write itself as I worked on this one, I will try to think through an education that can free us not only from the weight of ignorance, but from the deadening, deadly hold of banality.” Are you currently at work on your next book? And what are you thinking about the sort of education we need to free us from banality?

EM: Yes, I am working on the next book. I have published two papers on teaching thinking in the last couple of years (one of them with colleagues) in which I begin to present what such teaching can actually look like. (No, I am not merely calling for more “critical thinking.”) I am ever more concerned that the present pressures on education are designed to move us in precisely the opposite direction, toward the training—not the education—of workers who, at all levels and including the professions, will then think only within and not around and about their fields. They, we, can perhaps thus “succeed,” but at what cost to our consciences, our communities, our many environments? This is a recipe for disaster. It is just what extensive evils require.

We need modes of education—formal, but also informal—that make the art and practice of reflexive, reflective thinking central, rather than rendering it peripheral or suspect, as it is now. I do define what I mean by this kind of thinking in The Evil of Banality, of course, and I realize that terms like reflexive can be confusing. Briefly: We use our minds in many ways, but reflexive thinking is possible in and about all others. We are doing it when we reflect on our own thinking, as we are doing right now. “Stop and think,” we say, and we mean, “Pause, reflect on yourself, your actions, the feeling swamping you.” That, the most basic and liberating kind of thinking because it makes choice and so, also, morality possible, is of life-and-death importance, and I fear that the most— as well as the least-educated can and have passed through our schools without practicing it (however much they do or do not know). It is not the ignorant who are responsible for all that leads to climate change. Our education has failed at all levels, or it would not be normal, “business as usual,” to do such massive harm.

The auto-pilot of banalities includes the crude common use of epithets, prejudices worn smooth by regular use, group-think within offices and organizations, technical language that closes us off from the queries and objections of others or even our own everyday selves, religious dogmas that defy thinking, and a focus on career success and profit that becomes the only game we are playing. All of these and more make it possible for us, for the many, to do the sustained work of enormous harm when whole systems are perverted to serve only the power and profit of the few. But thinking together about what we believe we know, what is established, and what works smoothly within present systems can help free us from the auto-pilot of thoughtless, dangerous banalities, including those that are handed around thoughtlessly as proof that we are “good” or on the right side. (Yes, I write also about the banality of “good.”)

Indeed, The Center for Humans and Nature facilitates precisely this kind of learning and thinking to-
together, so yes, we can educate thinkers, and do so right along with job training, professional preparation, and the life-enhancing liberal arts. All can be reduced to mere training, to preparing people to do what is required to get along and reach for “success,” whatever we are doing. All can be opened to the Socratic call to lead an examined life, to the awakening of conscience as a way to be good at what we do in all senses.

We started with Hannah Arendt. Let’s end with her. In The Human Condition, she set out to think what we are doing, and so focused philosophically on action, work, and labor, or the vita activa. And time and again, here and elsewhere, she returned to a quote from Cato, which from memory (perhaps not precise, then) I will say this way: Never is he less alone than when he is by himself; never is he more active than when he does nothing. This, of course, concerns a thinker (male or not).

The United States has a long history of anti-intellectualism, of scorn for the “useless” life of the mind and “pointy-headed intellectuals” and “other-worldly academics,” “educated” or “coastal elites,” and on and on. Yes, there are critiques to be made, assuredly so—but a one-line finding of my years of research on how so many ordinarily decent people can make extensive evils possible is this: People who are not thinking are capable of anything. We have gone too far in that direction. We need a contemporary Enlightenment.

JB: You have given us excellent tools for a discussion that should lead us to think more intensely about the responsibility we have as humans and to the environment, and the elimination of the extensive evil that threatens the next generations. It has been a pleasure talking with you. Thank you, Elizabeth.