



## Evil is not Banal

*By Tom Eggebeen*

While lots of questions can and should be raised about the nature of evil, Dr. Abigail Rosenthal's presentation raises questions about the timing of Hannah Arendt's book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, suggesting that Ms. Arendt's life-long love affair with Martin Heidegger, and her later defense of his "Nazi" affiliation as naive, influenced her to describe Adolf Eichmann in a softer light, not in the terms that he himself used in his personal documents, revealed in his boastings while living in Argentina, or even found in Arendt's own earlier works.

Hannah Arendt's student love affair (she was 19 years old) with the married Professor Heidegger lodged in her spirit, in spite of their years apart. Heidegger broke it off in 1929. She fled Germany in 1933, and then married, finally coming to the United States in 1941. Eventually she would return to Germany for post-war work.

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Throughout these tumultuous years, Ms. Arendt worked long and hard to defeat the Nazis and to help her people. An "intelligent hope," writes Dr. Rosenthal, moved and empowered her (Rosenthal, *A Good Look at Evil*, p. 241). She wrote clearly and honestly about the horrors of Naziism, both as an intellectual system and in practice. But something changed in 1950: she met "him" again.

The question, then, is not what Ms. Arendt may or may not have know of Eichmann, but rather a question of something deeper, or as Dr. Rosenthal puts it, "In tribute to the woman she might have been, she left us the paper trail of clues. It was for us to put them back into their original order so that, finally, we could see how exceptional and wonderful was the life story she began and how regrettably she spoiled it" (Rosenthal, *A Good Look at Evil*, p.256).

Dr. Rosenthal is not without sympathy for a young woman in a time when men ruled the roost and guarded the gates of academia. But sympathy cannot mask the sad conclusion that Ms. Arendt, indeed, spoiled her story. "Evil is not banal," Rosenthal asserts; and in so claiming. "Arendt betrayed her own life."

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Dr. Rosenthal is a winsome speaker, going through her material with aplomb and humor, and courage, as was evidenced during the q&a session afterward, when a pleasantly dressed gentleman took out some notes and began to recite the reasons why Jews themselves were responsible for the Holocaust. Dr. Rosenthal listened patiently, and when the man finally ended, she replied (this from her blog published March 5 just a few days afterward):

“Looking upward, the guidance I got was unequivocal. What I said, following it, was this:

‘I DENOUNCE YOU FROM FLOOR TO CEILING.  
I WILL NOT ENTER A DISCUSSION  
OF ANY OF THESE POINTS.  
THESE ARE NOT ‘FACTS.’  
THESE ARE NAZI CANARDS.’”

I am grateful for her response, because evil is not banal; it is deadly and deceitful, though often dressed in respectable garments. Dr. Rosenthal replied as needed; in other words, Dr. Rosenthal did not spoil her story.